スレイヤーズすぺしゃる⑩

破壊神はつらいよ

神坂 一

イラスト あらいずみるい

富士見ファンタジア文庫

Slayers Special Volume 10

Being a Goddess of Destruction is Hard Work

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The Legend of the Songstress (Part 1)

——I could hear... a song.

High. Low. Like a lament, or like a hymn.

I came to a halt right then and there.

The brilliant full moon, hanging far overhead, illuminated the night forest in white.

——*At night, sometimes, you can hear a woman's singing voice coming from the mountains*——

In a certain village I had stopped by, such an incident was occurring.

If it were just a matter of hearing a song, one could simply assume a soprano singer or someone similar was undergoing mountain training and leave it at that, but——

Whether on some business, or perhaps trying to track down the source of the voice, it seemed several villagers who had entered the mountains had failed to return.

And so, the village chief requested that I investigate; that was the gist of it.

To be blunt, the commission fee wasn't much. Despite that, the reason I took this job was an act of curiosity: what exactly was the true identity of that voice?

Drawing people in with a song and then harming them—the first thing that comes to mind is the Seiren, the sea monster, but those are creatures of the ocean.

...Well, this world is surprisingly deep in strange ways, so perhaps there might be a Seiren out there with a hobby for mountain climbing.

At any rate, with those circumstances in mind, I was scouting the mountain and——

Now.

I finally caught the sound of that singing voice.

Melting into the clear night wind, the song could be heard.

I pressed forward toward the direction of the sound.

Pushing through thickets, passing through narrow paths between the trees——

Before long, my field of vision suddenly opened up.

I was at the peak of a sheer cliff.

At the very edge of that cliff—with its back turned to me—there it was.

The song——stopped.

With flowing black hair fluttering and reflecting the moonlight, it turned toward me.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! You're late! Lina Inverse! I was worried you might not show up!"

Chudoooom!

At that brain-piercing stupid laughter, I reflexively self-destructed.

"...Na... Naga...!?"

——Yes.

It was neither a Seiren nor a soprano singer in training. It was, without a doubt, the woman who had disappeared a while back—my self-proclaimed rival, effectively my "goldfish poop," the well-known Naga the White Serpent!

"Youuuuu! Why on earth are you singing in a place like this!? It’s confusing!"

"Hmph. The reason is simple."

Without a hint of being fazed by my approaching fury, she swept her hair back with a flourish and said,

"When I arrived at the village at the foot of the mountain today, they mentioned hearing a woman’s voice in the mountains.

Upon hearing the details, it seemed a mage resembling you, Lina, had headed out to

investigate."

"...So... you decided to poke your nose in because you wanted a share of the commission fee?"

"Hmph. Your reading of the situation is still shallow."

At my disgruntled words, she wagged her right index finger back and forth—*tsk, tsk, tsk*.

"...Then... why?"

"I thought I'd tease you a bit."

"Just go home already!"

Gedoshi!

"Hyaaaahhhhhhh...!"

From my full-powered kick, Naga's scream faded into the distance toward the bottom of the cliff.

...Oh. Come to think of it, was this the edge of a cliff?

I kicked her off on impulse, but... since it's Naga, I guess it's fine.

...Geez... making things so complicated...

I turned on my heel irritably and——

Stopped in my tracks once again.

——A song.

Yes. To my ears, I certainly heard a song.

For a moment, I thought Naga, having fallen off the cliff, was still persistently singing to annoy me, but—no.

The song was coming from a different direction than the cliff, and the voice was different from the one Naga was singing with earlier.

——This time——is it the real deal?

I began to walk toward the direction of the singing.

Eventually——

Led by the song, I arrived in front of some decaying ruins.

The moonlight illuminated the stone pillars, covered in moss and ivy, with a pale blue glow.

The entrance door had long since rotted away, and a gaping black darkness stretched into the depths of the ruins.

Now, I could no longer hear that song.

While I was moving through the forest, the singing voice had suddenly cut out—and not long after that, this place appeared before my eyes.

There was no sign of anyone around. If there was someone, they were likely——in the depths of these ruins.

"Light!"

I manifested a magical light at the tip of my short sword, holding it up in my right hand like a torch, and slowly stepped inside the ruins.

"——Heh..."

A murmur escaped my lips unintentionally.

The floor and walls of the ruins illuminated by the light were, contrary to their decaying exterior, quite well-maintained.

It was clear evidence that people were coming and going.

The passage extended slightly diagonally downward. It seemed the main body of these ruins was underground.

Before long——

"——Who's there!?"

It wasn't long before a clear woman’s voice, like a trembling bell, rang out.

She seemed to be further down the passage, but the light didn't reach that far.

From her perspective, I, holding the light, was probably perfectly visible.

However, there was no hostility in her voice. What was there was a color of fear that couldn't be hidden.

If I acted carelessly here, she might flee even further back. I stopped where I was and said,

"...Ah... I heard a song... so I just came to check it out."

There was a brief silence following my answer.

"...T-then... you aren't one of *their* comrades...?"

A voice like a young girl, still retaining some childishness, asked hesitantly.

"Theirs?"

"Yes... people who are after my life and the thing sleeping in the back of this building... are nearby..."

Hmm... it seemed there were various circumstances at play here.

And perhaps, there was some connection between these people targeting her and the disappearance of the villagers.

"Hey... if it's alright with you, could you tell me a bit more?

I might be able to help you in some way."

"...Really...?"

"Really. Believe it or not, I'm a mage. I travel all over the place.

...Of course, I understand why you'd suspect I might be a spy for the people after you, but——

I only came here because the village at the foot of the mountain asked me to find out the cause of the singing in the mountains.

That song——you were the one singing it, right?"

"..............."

The other person remained silent for a moment as if thinking about something, but eventually said,

"I understand. I'll believe you.

Because, you don't look like you're lying.

I'm coming over there now."

Following the voice, the sound of clanking footsteps approached me.

...Clanking...?

Before long.

When she appeared within the light I held up, I reflexively knitted my brows.

A body shining in metal black under the magical light.

The spikes on the shoulders and gauntlets traced menacingly sharp curves.

The owner of that voice was a figure in rugged full-body armor, easily two or three heads taller than me.

"Hi there."

With a somewhat shy voice and gesture, she—it—flickered a V-sign with its right hand near its shoulder... no, it clanked it.

"...Um..."

I asked in a somewhat raspy voice,

"...I'd like to ask... why are you wearing such rugged armor...?"

"No!"

Interrupting my words with a sad voice, she (I think) placed both hands on the cheeks of her helmet and shook her head back and forth—not a tremble, but a clank, clank.

"Don't call it armor! I have the name Natalie, you know!"

...So... it's Natalie, then...

Regardless, I really wished she'd stop making those kinds of poses in that outfit. Looking at it felt like my brain was going numb.

"...A... my name is Lina...

...So, let me ask, Natalie, why on earth are you in that armor—"

"I told you not to call it armor!"

She interrupted me again.

It seemed she had a complex about being called "armor," but...

"...Then, well... why are you... dressed like that...?"

"How rude, Lina. 'Dressed like that.'

Even so, I personally think it's not half bad.

Because, you see, I'm a Living Mail."

……

At that moment.

My brain had, without a doubt, come to a complete halt.

——Moving Armor.

A literally moving suit of armor created by possessing a full suit of armor with a low-level spirit or similar entity.

They follow the creator's orders absolutely and are primarily used as guardians.

They are relatively powerful and have considerable resistance to basic attack magic of earth, water, fire, and wind, but they have the flaw of only following simple and clear commands.

——Sentences exactly like the explanation I once read at the Mages' Guild filled my

head.

"...What's wrong? Lina?"

.....Wait!?

Being called, I finally came to my senses.

"...U-um... did you... by any chance just say 'Moving Armor'?"

"Yeah."

With both fists clenched near her chin, she gave a firm nod.

——Indeed, the black armor covered her completely without a gap, and even her face was hidden by a full-face helmet with the visor lowered.

Normally, things called Moving Armor only follow very simple commands; they don't talk, and of course, they don't tremble in "maidenly" poses.

"...Are you... really... Moving Armor...?"

"I'm telling you, I really am. Jeez.

You're so suspicious, Lina.

Ah. But, the fact that you didn't know I was Moving Armor means you really aren't one of their comrades, doesn't it?"

.....

"Um... I still can't quite believe it... if you don't mind... could you show me what's inside the visor...?"

At my words, Natalie gave a small shrug and said,

"Geez!

Asking to see inside so suddenly, you're so bold, Lina!

But fine. I'll show only you, as a special treat."

……

Saying that, Natalie slid the visor up with both hands.

——Indeed——

If someone were wearing it, their face should naturally have been visible there, but instead, only a hollow darkness stretched out.

If that was the case, she was either genuine Moving Armor, or perhaps a Dullahan with an empty helmet on its head—something of that sort.

Unfortunately, I couldn't for the life of me imagine a reason why a Dullahan would put an empty helmet on its head and lie about being Moving Armor.

...Well... I couldn't imagine why Moving Armor would be acting all maidenly either...

However, if Natalie was Moving Armor, I understood the reason why she was here alone.

"...Which means, Natalie... you received an order from your creator to 'protect this place' or something?"

"I don't like the term 'creator.' I call him 'Father.'"

...Yeah, yeah... whatever works for you...

"But... I don't really understand it."

Natalie placed an index finger to her cheek and tilted her head slightly.

"To be honest, I don't remember much about Father... that's why I call him my 'Father in my heart.'

I sometimes think that maybe I hit my head in the past and lost my memory."

There's no way that's the case.

I wanted to retort, but somehow, I felt it would be scary, so I decided against it.

"But, somehow, I feel like I have to protect the room in the back... so I've been here all this time, looking after the place."

"I... I see...

I suppose your creat—I mean, Natalie's 'Father'—wanted it that way.

In that case, what about the singing?"

"...Well..."

Natalie, looking somewhat bashful and fidgeting, gouged the stone wall with her finger.

"Even for me, on a beautiful moonlit night like this, I get a bit lonely.

At times like that, if I go outside and sing, I feel a little better.

Don't laugh!

Even so, I'm still a slightly sentimental sixteen-year-old!"

"...Are you sixteen...?"

"I just feel that way, somehow.

More importantly.

About the people who are after me."

——Ah.

My brain, which had been going numb, finally started working normally again.

"Right. That's the story.

You said 'those guys,' so does that mean there are many of them?"

"I don't know—how many there are."

Natalie shook her head slightly back and forth with an anxious voice.

"One day, a mean-looking man came and told me to let him through... when I refused, he set Ogres and things on me...

At that time, the other side left midway, so I was saved... but I was really scared then..."

"Hmm..."

I thought for a moment and said,

"...I doubt it, but... could the man who came then be your creator—your Father—?"

"Don't be ridiculous!"

Natalie raised her voice at my words.

"There's no way such a shabby old man could be my Father!

The Father who remains faintly in my memory is a tall, slender, very wonderful person, like a prince!

One day, he'll come to pick me up on a white horse."

I don't think there's a prince who would name Moving Armor "Natalie." Usually.

...No... maybe that's not entirely true...

For a moment, the face of a certain pacifist crossed my mind, and I reconsidered.

"...Actually, Natalie.

In the village at the foot of the mountain, there's an incident where people who entered this mountain are disappearing.

I'm thinking there might be some connection between those people after you and that incident.

Hey, do you happen to know where their hideout is?"

"Hmm..."

At my question, Natalie clanked her index finger against her cheek again.

"...Natalie doesn't really know. I haven't left here very much.

But, I know the direction they fled in."

"I see...

Hey, did they come recently? Were there quite a lot of them?"

"Let's see. I think it was three or four days ago. I think there were five or six Ogres."

I see. If that's the case, I might still make it.

If five or six Ogres walked through the forest in a group, they'd leave a trail no matter what.

If it was three or four days ago, those tracks shouldn't have disappeared yet.

"Alright. Then it's settled. For now, let me sleep around here tonight, and tomorrow morning I'll head out right away to find their hideout!"

"This is bad! It's terrible! Lina! Wake up!"

It was early the next morning when Natalie's voice woke me up.

Still drowsy, I lay there and absentmindedly looked around to see Natalie running toward me from the entrance with clanking, clunking footsteps! Her complexion—well, that didn't change—but she was clearly in a panic!

——Gah!

If I were shaken awake with all her strength by someone like that, I might actually die. I scrambled to my feet in a hurry.

"——W-what's wrong, Natalie!?"

Standing up and asking, she (?) came to a clanking halt in front of me.

"Someone is——outside! It must be those people who are after me!"

Did they make the first move from their side!?

I ran through the dark passage and burst outside.

From what I could see at a glance, nothing was moving nearby; the forest simply stretched out quietly, bathed in the soft morning sunlight.

Quietly——yes. Without even the sound of a single bird.

It was obvious that someone was lurking nearby. A mixture of wariness and bloodlust was hidden here and there.

——Thinking they're hidden like this...

Just as I was about to open my mouth to mock them thoroughly.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

Echoing through the trees was that familiar stupid laughter!

"——N-no way!? Naga!"

"I didn't think I'd meet you in a place like this!

You put me through a terrible time yesterday..."

Still without showing herself, only her needlessly high-tension voice echoed around.

"So you were alive!? Tsk! And here I thought I'd finally finished you off!"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! Don't make me laugh! Lina! No one would die just from falling off a cliff like that!"

It's just you. You're the only one who's that immortal.

"...But judging by the look of things, it doesn't seem like you came here just to see me...

It looks like you're with some strange people.

——Anyway, why don't you stop hiding and come out?

Unless you want to be blown away along with the surrounding forest, that is."

"...Tsk!"

With a click of a tongue, emerging from the bushes here and there were not Naga, but five or six Ogres and a single middle-aged man who looked like a mage.

Naga was nowhere to be seen.

"——That's the man!"

Hiding her massive form behind my back and clinking slightly with a tremble, Natalie pointed at the man with a frightened voice.

"That man attacked me the other time!"

"...I see... Natalie, he really is a shabby-looking guy, just like you said..."

"Shut up!"

The shabby man grew a vein at my words.

"Naga! You come out too, already!"

"...Um, Lina..."

Poke, poke. Natalie's finger tapped my shoulder guard.

Turning around, I looked in the direction Natalie was silently pointing——

"Whoa!?"

Right on the roof of the ruins' entrance—where I had just come out of—stood a familiar, nonsensical figure.

"W-when did you!?"

"I was here from the start."

Naga replied with a somewhat offended voice.

——I see. Because I heard it from almost directly above my head, I mistakenly thought the voice was echoing through the forest.

Most likely, the enemy's plan was for Naga to intentionally stand out and draw attention, while the shabby mage and the Ogre squad moved to catch us off guard.

However, because Naga had stood in a place that was *too* conspicuous, she ended up not being noticed, and my presence had turned that plan to dust.

...Well, there's also the theory that it wasn't much of a plan to begin with.

"That person looked lonely because you didn't notice her, Lina."

"S-shut up!"

At Natalie's words, Naga blushed slightly.

"...But anyway, Naga, why on earth did you team up with these people?"

"Hmph! While I was lying there after being kicked off the cliff by you yesterday, I was saved by a passing Ogre! It turns out that Ogre was a comrade of the people there!"

...Saved by a passing Ogre... maybe they just thought some food had fallen...?

"I was asked to help exterminate a strange Moving Armor for thirty gold coins, but it's convenient that you're here too, Lina! I'll dispose of you all at once!"

"Calling me a 'strange Moving Armor' is so mean! Lina! Is that an acquaintance of yours!?"

"She's an acquaintance. Not a friend."

I stated clearly and firmly to Natalie's question.

"...Hmph! I don't care who you are, fine! I'll dispose of you along with the armor! Get them!"

At the mage's command, the Ogres roared!

"Hmph! Here I come! Lina!"

Saying that, Naga leaped!

However!

——*Slap*.

Splat!

With a single leg sweep aimed at the moment of her landing, Naga fell flat on the ground with pathetic ease.

She didn't move after that.

Hmph. Child's play.

The Ogres came rushing toward me, but I had already finished chanting the spell.

"Fireball!"

Doooooooooon!

Red light flashed, and crimson flames exploded.

The single strike I unleashed easily blew the Ogres away.

Whether pressed by the blast or perhaps because his legs gave out, the mage plopped down on his backside right then and there.

This guy was child's play too, after all.

"...I-impossible!? For there to be such a caster...

...Ha! Lina...!? You were called that... no way! Are you *that* Lina Inverse!?"

"Probably, I'm *that* Lina Inverse."

At my answer, the color completely drained from the mage's face.

...He's probably heard all sorts of terrible rumors about me anyway. Bandit Killer, Destroyer of Morals...

"Known by the nickname 'The Great Demon King's Toilet Seat'...!?"

"Don't get familiar with that name!"

Gashaaaaa!

A stone about the size of a baby's head that I threw made a direct hit on the mage's noggin.

"W-wait! It's a misunderstanding! The real villain is that Moving Armor over there!

I might look mean, but believe it or not, I'm actually quite a good person..."

"Is there a good person who sets Ogres on others 'just because'!?"

Thud!

The second round of the stone-throwing attack.

...Geez... even if he's going to lie, I wish he'd say something a bit more plausible.

At any rate, I should interrogate this guy and clarify the situation.

Just as I stepped toward the mage with that thought.

"Stone Spirit Curse!"

The voice I heard from behind was Naga's!

Damn! She's revived already and chanted a spell!?

Kuooooooooooon!

The earth groaned at Naga's spell. The gathered stones and soil created a giant human shape right next to Natalie!

A Golem!

It looked a bit ugly, but its height probably exceeded the roof of a one-story house. Its power could be easily imagined.

".....!? Eeeeeeeek!"

A surprised Natalie let out a high-pitched scream, and while placing one hand over her mouth, she pushed the Golem away with her other hand!

Dogogamimekimiki!

The Golem's massive body was blown away with pathetic ease, mowed down countless trees, and helplessly returned to the soil it came from.

...W-whaaaaaaaaaa!?

At Natalie's beyond-extreme power, I reflexively froze.

True, things like Moving Armor have power that an average warrior can't stand against.

However——

To put it another way, it's only a level of power that a warrior who's better than average can somehow stand against.

With that level of power, could one do something like blow away a giant Golem with one hand?

Besides, if you punched a Golem with that much force, normally the armor's arm would get crushed.

But Natalie's arm didn't even look damaged.

To put it simply, Natalie's abilities were pulling ahead and surpassing those of normal Moving Armor by a long shot.

Which means, perhaps——

What they're after is Natalie's manufacturing process!?

Certainly, if there were many Moving Armor with this much power, a small army would be no match for them.

...I'd really hate it if they all talked in a maidenly way as a group, though...

Well, regardless, I'll know if I ask.

But——

When I turned around with that thought, the shabby mage was already gone.

——No way!?

Hurriedly scanning the area, Naga was also nowhere to be seen, and Natalie was just sitting there in a maidenly pose, trembling away.

Tsk! They got away while I was stunned!

But they shouldn't have gone that far yet.

The tracks left by the Ogres should also still be there.

In that case, there's nothing for it but pursuit and a counterattack!

"Natalie! I'm going to go after them now!"

"Wait!"

Natalie called out to my back as I flicked my cloak.

"I'm——going too!"

"Going too... are you going to be alright?"

"Well... it's a little scary, but..."

Natalie answered while fidgeting.

...No... I was asking in the sense of 'can you leave this place'...

Normally, if Moving Armor is ordered to 'protect this place,' it can't leave that spot.

No matter how much Natalie was beyond specifications, I couldn't imagine she didn't even have that basic rule.

Well, I'll find out if I actually try...

Natalie continued her words, still fidgeting.

"...Well, I'm... just a normal girl who's never even been in a fight..."

Liar.

Setting the fight aside, the "normal girl" part is something I can't accept no matter how I hear it.

"But... but! I think this is my problem after all! I can't just leave it all to you, Lina, and wait here!

I might not be of any help, but I think I have to see this through to the end!"

Hmm. For Moving Armor, she has a quite admirable attitude.

"——Alright. Natalie."

I gave a firm nod.

"Let's go. Together."

"Really? Thank you, Lina! Natalie is so happy!"

With a pose that seemed like roses might flutter in the background, Natalie clanked and shook her body.

And so——

The pursuit began.

(The Legend of the Songstress: To be continued!)

Next Episode Preview

Lina and Natalie head toward the hideout of the mysterious group! Waiting in their path: traps and Naga’s booming laughter! Anyway, with these two forming a pair, there's no way they’ll actually end up in a pinch! If they keep going straight like this, the second half will be over in just one page! What are you going to do, Author!? You're the one in a pinch, Author! (Note: This part isn't really a preview.) Next time: *The Legend of the Songstress: Part Two*. A conclusion that isn't surprising in the least awaits you!

The Legend of the Songstress (Part 2)

Synopsis

A woman’s song heard in the mountains—villagers who go missing. Following the mystery, the one I met at the ruins in the mountains was the source of the song: Natalie, a Moving Armor with the heart of a young girl (geez). But then, a mysterious group targeting Natalie and a stark-raving mad Naga appear! After a battle that wasn't even that intense, the march of Natalie and me began, chasing after the fleeing group and Naga! What exactly is their goal!? What happened to the missing villagers!? Anyway, for now, we've just got to go!

Rustle.

The forest stirred. A bloodthirsty aura surged.

It happened simultaneously.

Lina and Natalie came to a halt just as the attackers showed themselves.

"Oh no! What are these!?"

Natalie let out a frightened cry, her steel fists clanking and trembling against her mouth.

To be sure, the appearance of these assassins was quite bizarre.

Chimeras——

Specifically, things like an Ogre's torso with several Lesser Demon heads attached to it—the kind of thing a faint-hearted person would have nightmares about for two or three days.

There were five of these chimeras in total.

Of course, there was no way such things would be wandering around naturally. They were likely assassins sent out by the mages who had returned to the hideout a step ahead of us.

Judging by their appearance, they were probably chimeras created with the intent of "adding spell-casting abilities to an Ogre's stamina and power, capable of chanting multiple spells simultaneously."

Certainly, there was no way they could deal with Natalie through brute force alone. It was only natural they'd send in magical firepower.

That being the case, there was a possibility that the mage from earlier was hiding nearby even now.

"Natalie! Watch out for the enemy's spells!"

With that, I began to chant a spell.

And, just as I expected, the Lesser Demon faces stuck to the chimeras began to chant spells all at once.

It was pretty disgusting to look at, but now wasn't the time to be leisurely creeped out.

Then, faster than my spell, the chimeras' magic was completed!

Whaon!

A chorus of beast-like howls rang out, and countless spears of brilliant light appeared in the space around the chimeras!

──No way──*Raywing*!?

It's a spell that only deals damage to the target's spirit. If the target is a normal living creature, they'll just end up fainting, but it's a different story if it hits an Undead or a Demon—beings whose very life force is their spirit.

For Natalie, a Moving Armor, this spell could be fatal, regardless of how she handles minor elemental magic.

──*Natalie, make sure you dodge!*

Thinking this to myself while continuing my chant, I leaped far to the side.

Pyun!

At almost the same moment, the air was sliced as countless lights flew in!

I managed to dodge them—or so I thought, but I couldn't completely read them all; one of them grazed the side of my head slightly.

Instantly, a heavy sense of lethargy washed over my body.

──As I thought, *Raywing*.

If that's the case, the longer the battle drags on, the worse it'll be for us.

I have to end this in one go!

"Dragon Slave!"

Gugouuu!

The magical flame I unleashed instantaneously reduced one of the chimeras to black ash.

In the background, I could hear Natalie’s screams and clanking footsteps, but for now, defeating the enemies in front of me was the priority.

Alright, here I go!

I began to chant another spell.

Guaaaah!

The remaining chimeras howled again, and once more, countless *Raywing* spears appeared in the area.

However, this time, I didn't dodge the countless incoming arrows of light.

There was no need to dodge.

Just before the light arrows touched me, they stopped dead in the void, blurred for a second, and سپس vanished.

They were being blocked by the magical barrier that occurs during the chanting of the spell I was currently using.

And then, the spell was completed.

"Dragon Slave!"

Budogooooooooon!

The curse, which borrowed the power of this world’s Demon King, blew the chimeras away in an instant.

"Wow, that's amazing!"

When I turned around, Natalie was there, her clenched fists trembling in front of her chest.

"Lina, you can use such incredible spells. That's so cool!"

"Fufun. Well, you know.

...Wait, more importantly, Natalie, were you okay?"

"Yeah. I took two or three hits from those weird lights from the monsters just now, but I'm fine. It was nothing."

"You took two or three hits!?"

I reflexively raised my voice at Natalie's words.

Based on the sensation when that *Raywing* grazed me, it seemed the power was lower than what a normal human would unleash, probably because they were using Ogre bodies as a base.

But—

For a normal Moving Armor, a single hit from a human's *Raywing* would be the end.

And yet, even if they were slightly less powerful, to take two or three hits and receive almost no damage...

"...A-Are you really okay!? Natalie!?"

"I told you, I'm fine.

...Well, I do feel a little tired, I guess...

But it's okay. I'm a girl, after all; I won't let something like this discourage me."

...I have a feeling being a girl has absolutely nothing to do with it, but...

"Besides, I can't afford to be defeated in a place like this.

I haven't even had my first love yet!"

"...First love...?"

"That's right. I told you, didn't I? That a prince will come to pick me up one day."

Natalie, looking bashful and fidgeting, gouged the trunk of a nearby tree with her index finger.

"One day a wonderful prince will appear before me... and then the two of us will... and then we'll do this and that...

Kyah!

Natalie is so embarrassed!"

...Just what do you plan on doing...? You...?

"──But first, anyway."

Turning back to me as I stood there stunned, unsure how to react, Natalie spoke in a suddenly serious tone.

"Defeating those mages is the priority.

Come on, Lina, let's hurry."

".....Ah—R-Right."

I finally came to my senses and began to move forward again.

"──It seems this is the place..."

It wasn't long before Natalie and I came to a halt.

Right in front of us—in a sheer cliff—a cave yawned open.

"Eh? But isn't this just a normal cave?

There aren't even any guards."

"It certainly looks that way at first glance.

But look, there isn't much grass growing around the entrance, right?

In other words, someone is constantly going in and out of this cave.

And besides──"

I walked briskly toward the entrance of the cave.

Inside a crevice in a nearby rock, there was something small and glowing. I stuck my finger in and pulled it out—a silver chip about one size larger than a coin.

"If it were just a regular animal den, they wouldn't have set something like this up."

"...What is... that?"

"It's a magical tool called a Regulus Disk. It’s a set of two disks, and originally, it’s a tool for talking to someone far away──

But most likely, the fact that we're talking like this is being transmitted through this to whoever is in the depths of the cave.

So, of course, there’s no need to put guards here as if to announce that there’s something inside."

After explaining that to Natalie, I spoke into the Regulus Disk in my hand—and toward the enemy who was surely listening.

"──And well, that's how it is.

We're coming in now. Wash your necks and wait for us!"

Having made that bold declaration, I manifested a magical light and stepped into the depths of the cave.

Natalie followed a short distance behind me.

The cave had considerable height and width.

This would be more than enough for Ogres to come and go.

And then, there was the moss covering the walls thickly.

"...Somehow... I think maybe it’s different after all. There’s moss growing and everything."

"No. This is definitely the place."

I asserted firmly to Natalie, who was asking in an anxious voice.

She might not realize it, but──the smell was different.

That stagnant, damp smell unique to natural caves wasn't here.

The moss on the walls was likely planted artificially.

And the greatest proof of all was that the moss on the walls had been scraped off in places.

Most likely, when they went in and out of here, they scraped it with something hard.

And before we had walked very far──

Natalie and I reached a dead end in the cave.

"...See? It wasn't here after all, was it?"

Silently, I took off my right glove and stroked the dead-end wall with my fingertips.

──Just as I thought.

The coloring and texture were very similar to real moss, but it lacked the chilly sensation that real moss has.

In other words, only this part wasn't real moss; it was camouflaged with something

made to look like moss.

I noticed it because only this one section had no irregularities in the way the moss grew.

I put my glove back on, chanted a spell, and——

"Vibration Bomb!"

Daghaaaaahn!

A quite noisy sound echoed through the cave, and a large hole opened up in front of us.

In the depths, illuminated by the magical light, a white passage stretched straight back.

"Just as I thought—it’s a hidden door."

"Amaaazing! How did you know that, Lina!?"

"Well, you know. Intuition and experience.

But be careful, Natalie. Now that we've broken in like this, the enemies won't be playing dead anymore; they’ll surely attack us head-on."

With that, I walked down the passage into the depths.

And then.

"Fireball!"

I suddenly chanted a spell and fired it toward the back just as the two of us reached roughly the middle of the passage.

Zugoooon!

"Whaughaaa!?"

Several screams overlapped with the sound of the explosion.

Hmph. Just as I expected.

In a straight passage, assassins suddenly appear at the end and fire projectiles. The ones targeted have nowhere to hide and no time to dodge.

It’s a common interception pattern.

Reading it that way, it seems taking the initiative at the right moment was the correct move.

"We’re going in all at once! Natalie!"

Saying that one-sidedly, I ran off without waiting for an answer.

I checked left and right at the T-junction at the end. Aside from a few people lying scorched from the earlier *Fireball*, there were no signs of enemies.

They didn't seem to be carrying weapons. They were probably mages.

Anyway, before the next set of enemies could show up here, I needed to move to another, easier place to fight.

Following my intuition, I turned right down the passage, and at the end of a short walk, there was a single door on the left side of the passage.

Predicting that there would be an attack the moment the door was opened, I chanted a spell before opening the door and unleashed a strike.

"Fireball!"

Doooooooooon!

Along with a ridiculously loud explosion, crimson flames burst and scattered.

This *Fireball* spell, because of its flashy appearance and sound, was perfect for taking the initiative and intimidating the enemy.

However, this time, it seemed there were no enemies nearby, and the strike ended up being a mere waste.

──Passing through the door, we were in an unusually vast space.

The depth was about that of a small hall, but it stretched out incredibly long to the left and right.

And along the walls, both on our side and the opposite side, they were lined up. Countless suits of full-body armor.

"Be careful, Natalie.

There are probably a few Moving Armors mixed in here.

Don't panic if the armor suddenly starts moving."

"Eeeeh!? No way!? If I'm attacked by something like that, what should I do!?"

...I think you could easily win if you just fought normally. You.

With Natalie's abilities, those Moving Armors are just small fryS. What I feared was instead that Natalie would be surprised by the suddenly moving armor, fall into a panic,

and go on a rampage.

"It'll be okay. If you stay calm, we'll definitely manage.

——Come on. Let's go."

The moment I said that and began to walk.

Clank.

Suddenly, all the armor began to move!

"Whaaaaa!?"

At this, even I let out a cry of surprise.

No way——are all of these lined up here Moving Armor!? There's more than a hundred of them!

This is bad! If we were outdoors, I could blow them all away with a *Dragon Slave* or something, but if I used a spell like that in a place like this, the walls and ceiling would blow up, and we'd be buried alive.

In that case, should we retreat for now, or——

In that one moment where I showed hesitation.

The situation fell into the worst possible state!

"Noooooooo!"

Whether it was because of the Moving Armor or my voice, or both, a surprised Natalie suddenly fell into a panic and began to rampage!

Doggan-gakkyon-gegon! Meshi!

Every time she swung her arms and legs around, the Moving Armors were crushed, blown away, and the walls were gouged, scattering rubble everywhere!

Dohieeee! This is bad! If I get caught in the collateral damage of something like this, I'll really die!

"Raywing!"

I hurriedly chanted the high-speed flight spell and fled the scene at full speed.

I don't know where or how I flew around——

Breaking through a random door, passing through various passages, I suddenly realized I had reached another room alone.

It was roughly square with a high ceiling, large enough for a small house to fit inside entirely.

Countless magical lights lit on the walls illuminated the room brilliantly.

...But, considering the scale of this base and the fact that they had that many Moving Armors, the opponent is clearly different from some rogue mage.

On the opposite side of the room, a black passage yawned open——

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! Welcome, Lina Inverse!"

It was then that the familiar stupid laughter shattered the silence.

Before long, a single figure emerged from the depths of the opposite passage, footsteps echoing.

A black cloak, black hair—there was no need to even look at that utterly nonsensical costume.

My self-proclaimed eternal rival: Naga the White Serpent!

She pointed a finger sharply at me and said,

"To take the words of a crazed Moving Armor seriously and break into this laboratory—you've really gone soft, haven't you!

You should be grateful that I, Naga the White Serpent, am here to wake you up! Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

"Why don't *you* wake up?"

I retorted to Naga's words.

"It seems you're trusting that shabby mage just because he picked you up when you were down... how on earth does that man look like a good person to you?"

At my question, Naga remained unfazed.

"Hmph! Don't make me laugh! Then, does a Moving Armor that uses feminine speech look like a good person to you!?"

"...Well... I mean... that...

But at least! Natalie doesn't seem like the type to tell lies!

Anyway, Naga, I bet in reality, rather than believing in them, you just got blinded by the money you were given, didn't you!?"

"Hmph! How rude to say I was blinded! I just thought that there's no such thing as a bad person who gives you a hundred gold coins out of nowhere!"

"...Wh-What!?"

A hundred gold coins out of nowhere!?

...W-Well, I suppose it's understandable to be blinded by that...

Wait. No, no. What am I doing getting caught up in it too?

"You're the one whose thinking is shallow! Naga!

If those people are villains, then if we take them down, you'll get more than a hundred gold coins—you can take as much treasure as you want!"

.....

At my words, Naga remained silent for a moment——

And then, she clapped her hands together.

——And thus, Naga joined my side.

The march of Naga and me began.

The enemy sent out Ogres, Moving Armors, and even strange chimeras one after another, but they were no match for Naga and me, who were blinded by treasure—I mean, burning with justice.

Additionally, Naga knew the inside of this base to some extent.

Without taking much time, Naga and I arrived in front of a large door.

Thud!

With a flashy sound from my kick, the door swung open.

And beyond that——

In a room with a luxurious design reminiscent of a castle's audience chamber, at the end of a red carpet, was a lavish golden throne.

And on that throne, a single man was deeply reclined.

He appeared to be in his early twenties. Shining blond hair with gentle waves. He was undoubtedly handsome, but in the depths of his deep blue eyes, there was a light that seemed to look down on others.

His clothing was that of a mage, but the difference was that his robe and cloak were quite pretentious, made of pure white silk with gold thread embroidery.

On top of that, he had a single red rose pinned to his chest. At this point, it was nothing but obnoxious.

And there were about ten mages standing by.

Among them was the face of that mean-looking mage.

"Welcome, young ladies."

The mage in all white stood up with a pretentious gesture.

"I believe Naga-san over there already knows──but I am the one in charge of this laboratory, my name is Weizak."

Having said that, he gave a bow with an utterly condescending gesture.

"Laboratory?"

Come to think of it, Naga seemed to have mentioned something like that earlier...

"Yes. My laboratory.

──I hear you are the legendary Lina Inverse-dono.

I am not so foolish as to go out of my way to cross swords with such a person."

"...For someone saying that, you seem to have given us quite a welcome?"

"That was originally prepared for Natalie.

After all, my original target was Natalie."

Weizak deflected my sarcasm with a cool face.

"From the way you talk, it sounds like you know Natalie well."

"Of course."

Weizak gave a pretentious nod at a 45-degree angle to the right and said,

"After all, I'm the one who ordered the staff here to create Natalie."

"...Wh-What!?"

At Weizak’s casual words, I reflexively raised my voice.

"But... that guy over there!"

I pointed at the shabby mage and said,

"Natalie looked at him and said, 'He isn't the one who made me'!"

"...Hmph... there was a slight miscalculation regarding that..."

He swept back his hair and spoke.

"Research into the arcane requires various things to come first. However, the amount an individual or a single sponsor can invest is limited.

──So──

This is the system I came up with.

I have multiple sponsors invest, and in return, we research and create chimeras, magical tools, or Moving Armors that follow the sponsors' wishes and provide them to the sponsors──that’s how it works."

"...I see... so you're a merchant of death, in other words..."

In that case, the funds would certainly be abundant. It would be possible to build such a large-scale underground facility or create an excessive number of Moving Armors.

"That’s a nasty thing to say.

I’d prefer you call it a 'tie-up.'

──In a separate laboratory building some distance from here, we were working on researching and creating an enhanced version of Moving Armor some time ago.

Yes. That place camouflaged as a ruin where Natalie was.

Regarding the enhancement of Moving Armor, I focused on something called the 'heart.'

When humans are emotionally moved, they can manifest unexpected abilities.

Therefore, I thought that by giving a Moving Armor a heart──a personality—it might be able to manifest power beyond the norm."

"...For someone speaking so pretentiously, that's a pretty crude plan..."

Twitch.

Weizak’s cheek momentarily twitched at my retort, but he maintained his expression as much as possible and said,

"The plan was a success."

But his voice cracked.

"Of course, while implanting a 'heart' into Natalie, I applied every conceivable magical enhancement.

And the finished Natalie far exceeded the performance expected from that.

This plan, which may seem crude at first glance, nevertheless achieved results that were as I expected——no, beyond my expectations."

Oh. He’s totally bothered by me calling it crude.

"——But there was a miscalculation, right?

Because Natalie had a heart, she stopped obeying you. Am I wrong?"

"Just as you suspect. As expected of Lina-san."

Ignoring the obvious flattery, I said in a cold tone,

"...Then the plan was a total failure after all."

Twitch-twitch-twitch!

Weizak's face distorted again.

"...W-Well... that’s just a difference in interpretation.

——Anyway.

I don’t know what acted in what way, but Natalie suddenly went on a rampage, and we hurriedly evacuated from that laboratory.

And next, when my subordinates went to check on the situation, to our surprise, Natalie had already completely forgotten about us and wouldn't let us near.

However, in the laboratory, numerous research materials regarding Natalie remain.

In this situation, it is necessary to recover the laboratory's materials even if it means destroying Natalie.

I once sent subordinates with Ogres, but... it only ended in confirming that Natalie's performance was beyond expectations.

Next, I requested help from Naga-san over there, but——

Before I knew it, you were by Natalie's side, Lina-san.

That’s how it is.

——Now. With this, I believe you understand that both Natalie and that laboratory are originally ours.

In other words, you no longer have a reason to take Natalie's side.

——So, what do you say, Lina-san? And, once again, Naga-san.

Would you be willing to assist in the capture, or perhaps the destruction, of Natalie?

Of course, I will give you a reward for your help."

"...I see... so that's the situation."

I muttered after finishing Weizak’s ridiculously long explanation.

Certainly, if that was the case, Natalie and that ruin were the property of Weizak and his group.

Being a "merchant of death" isn't a commendable thing, but mages who research dangerous things to gain funds are a dime a dozen. I have no intention of acting all righteous and taking them down one by one.

However——

"I have two questions before I give you an answer."

"What would they be?"

"One. Giving a Moving Armor a heart and making it have abilities beyond the norm——

That’s fine, but why the heart of a young girl?"

"...Hmph... a simple matter."

Weizak swept back his hair again and said,

"Because I like women more than men!"

...Someone who's honest with himself...

"I like women more than men. And I like the strong more than the weak.

In that case, a Moving Armor of unparalleled power that also possesses the loveliness

of a woman is the ideal existence!

The result of that thinking was the creation of Natalie.

...Hmph. To be honest, after she was finished, I did think she was a bit different from my image."

You should have realized that before making her. At least that much...

I bet this guy... actually hasn't thought about much of anything...

"...Fine.

Then, another question.

Lately, in the village at the foot of the mountain, it seems several villagers who entered this mountain have gone missing.

...Any idea why?"

"...Well now..."

Along with the vague answer, the smile on Weizak's face said everything.

They either found this laboratory by chance or met Weizak and his group—and were probably silenced.

"...I see. I understand perfectly."

"And so—your answer?"

"Of course. It's a no."

...Hmph...

At my answer, Weizak gave a small laugh.

"Good grief... I didn't think you were such a humanitarian, Lina-san... you're quite different from the rumors."

What kind of rumors have you been hearing? You?

"In that case, you and I are enemies!

There is nothing left but to fight and settle this!"

Snap!

Weizak raised his right hand high and snapped his fingers.

In response, a single red Moving Armor appeared from behind a pillar.

But even if you bring out one of those, it’s no match for Naga and me!

...Wait, come to think of it, I haven't heard Naga's voice—which normally should have let out a booming laugh in a situation like this—for a while now.

Shifting my gaze, there was Naga, lying on the floor a little behind me, sleeping soundly!

...I bet she... got bored with Weizak's long story and took a nap...

...Well, whatever. I’ll just handle this myself somehow, and later, when we're dividing the treasure, I'll use this as an excuse to take a larger share!

"I'll tell you now, you shouldn't underestimate this.

This one doesn't have a heart, but other manufacturing methods reproduced Natalie as much as possible; it is, in a sense, a Mark II of Natalie.

It’s on a completely different level than normal Moving Armor——"

Weizak's movement froze as he was about to say that.

His gaze was fixed behind me.

——Could it be——

Thinking that and turning around—outside the door, as expected——

"Natalie! You were safe!"

...Well, I wasn't really that worried.

But despite my call, Natalie showed no reaction.

The place her gaze was directed was toward Weizak, the handsome guy with blond hair and blue eyes.

...Wait, could it be...?

"...Prince."

"...Eh...?"

At Natalie's murmur, Weizak let out a dumbfounded voice.

"That's right! Natalie!"

Not missing this chance, I raised my voice.

Pointing sharply at Weizak, I said,

"If I were to say one more thing, this man is your 'Father'!"

"Oh my!"

Natalie, with a bouquet of roses in the background, brought both fists to her mouth, clanking and trembling.

"Fatherrrrrr!"

She let out a voice full of emotion, gouged the floor, and ran.

Fumi! Gatchan-gatchan-gatchan! Dogego! Gatchan-gatchan!

Stepping over the sleeping Naga, blowing away Natalie Mark II with pathetic ease, she headed for her "Father" and ideal prince, Weizak.

In that case, the development that follows is easy to imagine.

That is——an embrace rejoicing in an emotional reunion.

Weizak's scream echoed through the hall.

And thus, the incident came to an end.

As a result of the investigation by officials who received my report, it seems Weizak and his group had been doing various illegal things besides the villager disappearance incident.

Weizak, who is currently bedridden after being hugged by Natalie, will likely head straight to jail as soon as his injuries are healed.

Naga and I also snatched Weizak's treasure, and our pockets became quite warm.

Just——

The one I felt a little sorry for was Natalie.

Having lost Weizak at the same time as their reunion, she was now a lonely soul without any relatives (not that Moving Armor had those to begin with).

So in the end——

Based on my suggestion, she started a second life as a songstress in the village at the foot of the mountain.

According to rumors I heard later, her popularity seems to be quite high, partly due to

the novelty.

If you should meet a Moving Armor songstress during your travels, don't be afraid to treat her as a friend.

However——

Just make sure you don't get liked *too* much and get hugged.

(The Legend of the Songstress: End)

The White Assassin (Part 1)

Zudooon!

An explosion without warning shattered the silence of the night—and my sleep.

——It was close!

I grabbed the short sword by my pillow and leaped out of bed.

At a glance, this was just a peaceful-looking, nameless inn in a nameless town.

Even in a place where nothing ever seems to happen, the seeds of trouble are always rolling around.

And when it comes to trouble, it usually leads to money!

I threw on my cloak to head to the scene immediately, but at that exact moment!

"Lina Inverse! I know you're in there! Show your face!"

A clear woman’s voice rang out from outside the window.

...Wait... so this trouble is connected to me...

When you have a bit of a reputation as a sorceress like I do, and you spend your days doing "good deeds" like defeating evil and skimming a little off the top, you tend to attract a lot of jealousy and grudges.

However, when the trouble is centered on me, it usually doesn't turn into profit.

...Working for free... how annoying...

Still, now that I'd been called out, I couldn't exactly ignore it.

In response to the voice, I flung the window open——

And froze mid-pose.

I was staying on the second floor of the inn.

Right there, in the air in front of me——she was floating.

She looked to be around twenty years old.

Her long, flowing silver hair and the loose white robes she wore shimmered in the

moonlight, drifting in the night breeze and dancing in the darkness.

Combined with her stunning beauty, the whole scene exuded an almost ethereal elegance.

——Of course, she was likely using *Levitation* or some other spell to float, but even knowing that, one could easily mistake her for a fairy or a beautiful ghost.

Yet, in stark contrast to her appearance, she spoke with a cold tone and a piercing gaze.

"——I hear you've been getting quite full of yourself lately, taking down bandits here and there just because you can use a little magic."

She raised her right hand and pointed at me—no, she pointed just beside me.

I looked over to see that the wall of the room next to mine had been scorched and blown wide open.

She had probably unleashed a *Fireball* or something similar.

"That was just a greeting.

Sleep well tonight.

Because tomorrow——will likely be your final day.

I, Rosa Lyman, will be the one to finish you!"

Rosa Lyman?

...Hmm... I felt like I'd heard that name somewhere before...

But in reality, people like her are common.

Someone who becomes slightly famous in the countryside, gets a big head, and decides to challenge a famous person like me—for better or worse—to make a name for themselves.

One time, some mage who had become famous for a research report on the magical analysis of tsetse flies even challenged me. I have no idea what was going through his head.

Naturally, I kicked him to the curb in an instant.

The woman before me was likely of that same breed. In that case, there was no need to wait until tomorrow; I should settle this right now!

Just as I was about to chant a spell, however.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! Don't make me laugh, Rosa Lyman! You, defeating Lina Inverse!?"

A familiar, stupid laugh suddenly intruded from the side!

Standing tall on the roof of a nearby house was a black shadow! Needless to say, it was my "accessory," Naga the White Serpent!

...She was supposed to be staying in the same inn, but she probably left the building the moment things started happening and climbed onto a nearby roof just to create a dramatic effect.

Naga pointed sharply at Rosa and shouted:

"Lina Inverse is destined to be defeated by me, her fated rival, Naga the White Serpent! I'd appreciate it if you didn't butt in from the sidelines!"

.....

I frowned at Naga's words for a moment, then——

"——Oh! That's right!"

I clapped my hands together.

"Come to think of it, Naga, a long time ago you *were* a challenger and my self-proclaimed rival. Man, I'd completely forgotten..."

"Don't say it with such distant eyes! Besides! I am still your rival even now!"

"...For someone saying that, I feel like you're constantly sponging off me for inn fees and meals..."

"...W-Well... anyway!"

Naga pointed at Rosa again.

"In any case, you defeating Lina is an impossible request! You should give up quietly and go home to sleep..."

"Burst Flare."

Zudomu.

Without even turning around, Rosa unleashed a strike that hit Naga dead center.

Sliding... thud.

Without a chance to resist, a charred Naga slid off the roof and fell.

...Well, it's a spell with low offensive power, and since it's Naga, she probably won't die.

"Lina Inverse. Perhaps you should be more selective about your friends? ——Though, now that I've targeted you, your life is nearing its end anyway..."

How annoying!

"Let me tell you just one thing,"

I said, glaring at Rosa with anger in my eyes.

"It's your business if you want to target my life. But——"

I pointed at Naga, who was sprawled on the ground.

"Absolutely stop calling that thing my friend!"

Perhaps pressed by my intensity, Rosa reflexively drew back slightly.

"...I... I see...

Regardless——tomorrow——"

With only that, she released her spell, landed on the ground, and turned away.

...Ah. I forgot to attack her immediately.

Well, whatever...

If she shows up tomorrow, I'll just counter her and strip her of every cent she has!

I made a firm vow to the moon hanging in the night sky.

"Eh? You know that person?"

"Hmph. Of course I do."

The next morning.

While having breakfast in the inn's dining hall, the topic of conversation was, naturally, the woman from yesterday—Rosa.

Naga claimed to know exactly who she was.

"Rosa Lyman is a court mage of the Lyzell Empire. ——Well, a *former* one."

Naga said nonchalantly while emptying cup after cup of brandy first thing in the

morning.

"She was quite famous, but the story is that about two years ago, the members of the Senate changed, they didn't get along, and she left the country."

"Hmm."

I gave a half-hearted response while eating my fifth healthy salad set from the breakfast menu.

This Naga—aside from her suspicious appearance and the fact that everything she does is impulsive—somehow possesses a strange information network.

I don't know where she gets her stories, but they tend to be remarkably accurate.

If that's the case, then Rosa probably really was a former court mage of Lyzell.

"...But the problem is, how skilled is she?"

A former court mage——society generally has an image that such a person can use incredible offensive magic, but that isn't always the case.

The overwhelming majority of court mages are hired as advisors or consultants because of their broad knowledge. It's common for their actual magical repertoire to be limited to *Lighting* or *Healing*.

However, there are those who become court mages specifically because of their offensive magic abilities.

If Rosa is the latter, I should assume she has a decent level of skill.

At the very least, she can use *Burst Flare* and *Levitation*...

"Well, in any case, from the way she spoke, she'll probably make her move today.

There's no point in dragging this out... let's settle it quickly."

With that, I downed my post-meal tea in one gulp.

"——I've been waiting for you, Lina Inverse."

In the middle of a forest road—a perfect spot for an ambush—countless presences appeared alongside her voice.

"It's not 'I've been waiting for you'!"

Kekon!

"Wkyoh!?"

As I shouted, the small stone I threw hit Rosa square on the head while she was hiding in the thicket.

"You said you'd attack the very next day, and it's been five days since then! What on earth have you been doing until today!?"

——That’s right.

It had been five full days since she declared war on me. For the first day, I was tense, wondering when she’d strike, but as the second and third days passed, my motivation gradually waned. Now that she was finally showing up, I was more annoyed than ready to fight.

"Hmph. It's obvious..."

At my words, she swept back her silver hair and said:

"I got scared of fighting alone after all, so I was gathering people with money!"

...She’s actually a coward, isn't she...

Rosa raised her right hand high and snapped her fingers.

At that signal, figures emerged from behind trees and deep within the brush—about a dozen of them in total.

Every one of them was dressed in dark green clothes with their faces hidden by cloth of the same color. A typical assassin style.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! Honestly, don't make me laugh!"

Completely unfazed, Naga stepped forward and let out her trademark laugh.

"Just because you gathered a bunch of people, do you think this..."

"Go."

Completely ignoring Naga’s preamble, Rosa gave the order, and the assassins moved all at once.

Some charged, while others began chanting spells on the spot——

Their target was only one: me!

However, by this time, I had already finished my chant.

"Dill Brand!"

Gou!

A donut-shaped ring of earth and debris around me blasted toward the sky.

It’s a spell with low lethality, but you won't come out unscathed if it hits you. I couldn't see through the rising debris, but the assassins who were charging had likely stopped in their tracks outside the dust cloud.

Shortly after, as the dust began to settle, the assassins started their dash again.

However——

There was no way I was going to hang around the same spot forever.

By this point, I had already chanted *Raywing*—the high-speed flight spell—and was soaring into the sky wrapped in a barrier of wind.

Then, I dove straight back down! I grazed and intimidated the assassins who were flustered at having lost their target, then changed trajectory and slammed into one of the assassins who had been chanting!

I knocked one enemy away, deactivated the spell, and landed on the ground. Turning around, I drew the short sword at my waist and dashed toward Rosa!

Panicked, Rosa and the assassins unleashed the spells they had chanted toward me.

"Fireball!"

"Freeze Arrow!"

"Flare Arrow!"

Just as I thought—their spells were all over the place! There was no coordination at all!

"Windy Shield!"

I drew their spells toward me and then activated the magic I had prepared.

It’s a spell that only produces a strong wind, but the effect was sufficient. The wind caught their uncoordinated spells head-on.

Zugoun!

The *Fireball* collided with the *Flare Arrow* and exploded, caught in the wind I created.

The blast evaporated the incoming *Freeze Arrows* and swallowed the *Flare Lance*,

raging wildly.

Taking advantage of the chaos, I charged toward Rosa!

She was the one hiring the assassins. If I took her down, the assassins would lose their lead.

"Guh!?"

To meet my approach, Rosa hurriedly drew a large knife from behind her waist.

Too naive. My short sword was just a decoy to draw her attention. This was the main act!

"Flare Arrow!"

I had added my own arrangement to the spell. Normally, if I use this spell, more than ten fire arrows appear, but this arranged version produced only one. In exchange, the chanting time was drastically reduced to about half of the usual!

In this situation, this was enough! The single fire arrow appearing before her eyes should hit her directly and put her out of the fight!

But at that moment!

"Listen to people when they're talking to you!"

Dogashi!

Angry at having her preamble ignored, Naga kicked Rosa from the side!

Aaaaaah! What are you doing!?

Bahi.

My *Flare Arrow* hit Naga instead, who had just sent Rosa flying with that kick.

"──Guh! Retreat!"

Near the charred and fallen Naga, Rosa immediately picked herself up and vanished into the depths of the forest thicket.

The assassins followed her without a moment’s delay.

──They were quick to withdraw.

I wanted to pursue, but it’s difficult to rely on mobility to scramble around inside a forest.

I looked over to see that the assassin I had slammed into had also disappeared. Did he

recover and escape on his own, or did his comrades take him...?

Either way, at this rate, they'll likely strike again soon.

And next time, they'll have a more refined strategy.

"...If I don't take them down early... they might become a real pain..."

Ignoring Naga, who had recovered and was shouting some kind of protest, I muttered those words while looking off toward the horizon.

"Huh...?"

Naga and I came to a halt two days later—again, while traveling along a road with little traffic.

This seemed a bit different from an ambush.

Standing by the roadside as if waiting for our arrival was only a single figure in an assassin's outfit.

There were no other signs of people around.

"I've been waiting for you."

The assassin spoke and slowly turned toward us. There was hostility, but I felt no bloodlust.

"It doesn't look like someone acting on their own out of a desire for glory... what do you want?"

"Take this."

With that, the assassin took something small from his shirt and tossed it lightly toward me.

──I almost caught it reflexively, but it would be bad if it were rigged with a poison needle. I batted it to the ground with my cloak.

It was an object about one size larger than a coin.

"Isn't that a Regulus Disk?"

Naga chimed in from the side.

Yes.

It's a set of two magical tools; after chanting a simple spell, if you speak into one, your

voice will reach the other.

"It’s a message from Lady Rosa."

『You can hear me, can't you? Lina Inverse.』

Perhaps the spell had already been chanted; Rosa’s voice began to flow from the Regulus Disk on the ground.

"I hear you. ──So, what is it?

Surely you haven't become too scared to show your face before me?"

『Hmph.

I believe I saw through your abilities to some extent in our previous battle.

I have no reason to fear you.

...That said, I haven't seen all your cards yet, and I’m quite fond of the word "perfection."

So──I’ve prepared a wonderful stage for you.』

"Hmph! You certainly like talking in circles! But..."

『If you keep going a little further, you’ll reach the town of Lanoke.』

Completely ignoring Naga, who was trying to say something from the side, Rosa continued speaking.

...Pay a little attention to her... Naga’s looking lonely...

『From there, if you take the narrow road heading north for a while, you’ll find a small village called Godoa.

It’s a tiny village with maybe fifty people in total.』

"Yeah, yeah. In other words, you’re saying you’re waiting there? To put it simply."

At my bored remark, Rosa continued in the same tone:

『Exactly. I’ll be waiting there.

With every single villager as a hostage.』

"...Wh-What!?"

Naga and I shouted simultaneously.

"The entire village as hostages... you’re joking, right!?"

『No. I’m serious.』

Rosa spoke with utter nonchalance.

"Are you sane!? I don't know anyone in Godoa, and I've never even been there!"

『I suppose not. ──But that doesn't matter. If you don't come, I wonder what will happen to the villagers...』

"...Guh...!"

Only now did I finally regret.

I regretted not taking Rosa down two days ago.

I thought she’d try all sorts of things, but I never imagined she’d resort to a tactic like this...

Of course, it might be a bluff that she’d do something to the villagers if I didn't go, but I couldn't exactly leave them be.

"...Fine..."

I spoke toward the Rosa who was presumably on the other end of the Regulus Disk.

"I’ll go! To that village!

But now that you’ve gone this far, I’m going to settle this once and for all!"

I picked up the Regulus Disk and tossed it back to the waiting assassin.

"You’d better set your traps and wait. This time, I’m going to be a little serious. Tell Rosa that."

The assassin gave a small nod, turned his back, and left.

Only Naga and I remained.

Once the assassin was out of sight, I finally spoke.

"──Naga, I’ll draw them away, so in the meantime, please handle the hostages."

"Wait. Why me..."

"You're the right person for the job. After all, Rosa doesn't seem to care about you at all."

"...The way you put that... is a bit irritating..."

"That's exactly why. Don't you want to give her a nasty surprise?"

"Well... I certainly do feel that way..."

"...If you say no, I'm going to bill you for all the inn fees and meals I've treated you to..."

At my whispered remark, a bead of sweat rolled down Naga's cheek. She looked away and said:

"Hmph! Fine! If you're going to beg that much, I'll take care of the hostages for you!

Just you watch, Rosa Lyman! I'll make you realize the foolishness of ignoring me, Naga the White Serpent! Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

Lanoke.

It was a small town off the main road with no particular distinguishing features.

From there, it was another half-day's travel. At the end of a narrow mountain path that could barely be called a road.

Godoa village was located in such a place.

...If there were a guard outpost nearby, I could use a tactic like spreading a lie that Rosa's group were "terrorists targeting the King's life" to have them surrounded by a large force, but in a place like this, Lanoke might have five or six guards at best.

There was no time to call for soldiers from afar.

In that case, we had to handle it with just Naga and me, according to the original plan.

The number of enemies wasn't overwhelming. As long as we could handle the hostages, the rest should be manageable.

"──Welcome, Lina Inverse."

I was greeted at Godoa village by Rosa and two assassins.

There were no other people around.

Presumably, the other assassins were guarding the captured villagers.

"What about the villagers?"

"They're safe. Of course. ──Though what happens next depends on your attitude."

I scanned the area and stopped my gaze on the largest building in the village.

"——They’re in there."

At my observation, Rosa nodded without being flustered.

"Yes. That was the only place that could hold everyone.

——Ah. If you try anything strange... well, I don't need to tell you that now, do I?"

"I suppose. ...But Rosa, you're quite shallow in your thinking."

"Shallow?"

Rosa’s eyebrow twitched at my words.

——Alright! She took the bait!

My goal was to buy time until Naga could rescue the hostages. Because she believed she held the absolute advantage, a moment of carelessness would be born.

——Of course, Rosa wouldn't have completely forgotten about Naga, who was with me.

Probably——she just didn't consider her a threat.

...Well... in reality, you wouldn't think a woman dressed like that and laughing like an idiot was actually strong. Normally.

"Heh... interesting. May I hear why you think I’m shallow?"

"If you think about it, you’ll understand.

Resorting to any means necessary is, well, rational in a way...

——But if you intend to make a name for yourself by defeating me, it’ll have the opposite effect.

You’ll probably want to say 'The fact that I defeated Lina Inverse remains unchanged,' but others will think, 'Anyone could do it if they resort to any means. It wasn't because you were strong.'"

——If this makes Rosa get stubborn and challenge me to a one-on-one fight, things will become very simple...

"…Hmph… I wondered what you were going to say…"

However, she laughed off my words.

"It seems you're the one who is mistaken.

——I never said I wanted to make a name for myself by defeating you.

My goal is simply to defeat you.

That is why I will use any means. That’s all."

Not a challenge for fame? ──In that case──

"...I see... so after you left Lyzell, you were out of work and became a pawn for villains, is that it?"

Did my words hit a nerve this time? Rosa raised her eyebrows.

"How rude! Who is a pawn for villains!? I’ll have you know I hate injustice!"

"Liar! What are you saying after firing offensive magic at an inn and taking villagers hostage!?"

"That was just a means to an end, so it's fine!"

"It's not fine!"

The two of us glared at each other for a moment──

"…Sigh…"

Eventually, Rosa was the one to look away with a small sigh.

She swept back her hair and said:

"…It seems you don’t understand. Our noble goal.

──Fine. I’ll tell you clearly.

I believe I said this. You’ve been getting full of yourself, taking down bandits and acting like a big shot.

That is the reason you’ve been targeted."

"…? You mean you were hired by bandits..."

"I told you you’re wrong!

I’ll tell you.

The one who requested your disposal from me was 'True Future'──

A human rights organization with its headquarters in this country!"

.....

"…Huh…?"

My eyes went blank at Rosa’s words.

"Every human being has human rights! Even if they are a villain! And yet, you go around hunting bandits, saying things like 'Villains have no human rights'!"

Rosa declared grandly toward me as I stood there stunned.

Behind her, the two assassins she hired also had blank expressions.

So they didn't know either... Rosa's goal...

"…A human rights organization wouldn't find that amusing—that’s how it is.

So I was hired, in the name of human rights and justice, to come and punish you!

Well! Do you understand now!? The magnitude of the sin you’ve committed!?"

"You idiot!"

Zugeshi!

Along with a cry of anger, the flying kick I unleashed knocked Rosa right on the head.

The two assassins standing by also seemed to have forgotten to guard her in an instant due to the sheer absurdity of the situation.

"Don't have a messenger of a human rights organization resort to assassination or take uninvolved villagers hostage!

What about the human rights of me and the villagers!?"

"Foolish!"

Unmoved by my protest, Rosa picked herself up and said:

"I am currently discussing 'the human rights of villains'! In other words, that is that, and this is this!"

Aaaaaaaah! No! This woman!

Among people who claim they "will use any means for the goal," there are often types like this.

Someone who runs so far ahead that they suddenly realize they’re neglecting the goal for the sake of the means!

Rosa was the exact archetype of that. ...Perhaps her employer, that human rights organization or whatever, was the same...

However, with this kind of opponent, there might be a chance for a certain type of persuasion to work.

"Wait! If that's the case, then it's a different story!"

I spoke to her with a solemn air.

"To think I was neglecting human rights... that is a complete misunderstanding!"

"…A misunderstanding…?"

Facing her as she frowned, I put on a "good girl" act with moist eyes.

"Yes——

I believe. In humanity.

There are no bad people in the world, and everyone will understand if you just talk to them!

Don't you think so, Rosa!?"

"…Well… I suppose…"

"In other words——"

I held up one index finger.

"Villains and people who don't understand even if you talk to them aren't human, so it's fine."

"There's no way that logic works!"

Ah! As I thought, persuasion failed!

"I won't have you calling it 'that logic'!"

"In any case, it seems further talk is useless!"

With that, Rosa leaped back a great distance to create space between us.

The assassins stood in my way, perhaps to buy time until Rosa could chant a spell.

I see. Regardless of the motive, an employer is an employer, I suppose.

"I'm sure you know this, but I won't allow a counterattack! Lina Inverse!"

Rosa began to chant a spell.

This spell was——*Burst Rondo*!

The strongest fire-based spell; a single strike can even melt a castle wall!

Is she planning to settle it in one blow!?

Where is Naga——not yet!?

Ignoring my inner impatience, Rosa's spell was completed shortly after——

Goooooon!

The explosion shook Godoa village!

(The White Assassin: To be continued!)

Preview of the Next Episode

The enemy's true identity is finally revealed! Rosa's demonic clutches close in on Lina! What will be the fate of Lina, Naga, and—while we're at it—the villagers!? How will Lina face this foe!? Next time: **The White Assassin: Part Two.** Please wait just a little bit!

The White Assassin (Part 2)

Synopsis

Lina is confronted by Rosa Lyman, a cold-blooded former court mage who will stop at nothing! After taking innocent villagers hostage, she reveals the identity of the unexpected mastermind: a human rights organization that finds Lina’s existence bothersome! How will Lina Inverse handle this enemy?

"——Wh...!?"

A thunderous roar echoed, and I couldn't help but cry out.

Actually, it wasn't just me. Rosa and the two assassins did, too.

She even forgot to release the spell she had finished chanting, her eyes shifting toward the sound.

At the back of the village—the largest building had been blown to smithereens, sending up a thick cloud of explosive smoke.

——That’s right.

The place where the hostages were supposed to be.

However, there was no reason for Rosa to harm the hostages at this timing. For starters, if she had ordered it, she wouldn't have been surprised by the blast herself.

...Which... means... could it be...?

The moment a possibility I didn't even want to consider flashed through my mind!

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

"Aaaaaaagh! I knew it!"

At the expected burst of idiotic laughter, I reflexively clutched my head and crouched down.

And then!

Emerging with a leisurely stride from the lingering smoke was none other than Naga the

White Serpent!

With her hands on her hips, she glared fixedly at Rosa.

"Rosa Lyman! Your ambitions end here! Ignoring the existence of me, Naga the White Serpent, was the end of your luck!"

Naga swept her hair back and shifted her gaze to me.

"Hmph! Lina! Just as you said, I've properly 'taken care of' the hostages and the assassin guards!"

"DON'T 'TAKE CARE OF' THEM!!"

Borigogish!

Rosa and I launched simultaneous dash-kicks that buried themselves in Naga's skull.

"What was that for!? All of a sudden!?"

Naga protested, seemingly unfazed by the attack.

"Don't 'what was that for' me! What are you doing taking out the hostages!?"

"What do you mean, Lina!? You're the one who said, 'I'll leave the hostages to you'! That's why I worked so hard to take them out!"

"I'm asking WHY you took them out! Why!?"

"Given the flow of the conversation back then, anyone would naturally think that's what you meant!"

"NO THEY WOULDN'T!"

...That's right. I forgot this woman has the judgment of a zombie or a skeleton; you have to explain things from one to ten...

But Naga ignored my criticism entirely.

"Well, anyway, now we don't have to worry about the hostages anymore, so it's fine, isn't it?"

"It is NOT fine!"

"Hmph. It seems you don't know the phrase 'all's well that ends well,' Lina."

"Where exactly is the 'well' part of this!? For starters, what kind of excuse are we going

to give the villagers when they wake up!?"

To my question, Naga replied quite simply:

"We'll just blame it on Rosa."

"Oh! I see!"

Now that was a nice idea! Rosa had already used the villainous tactic of taking hostages. Adding one or two more crimes to her tab wouldn't be much of an issue in the long flow of history.

I looked at Rosa and pointed at the smoke-trailing house.

"So, we've decided this was your doing. Hope you're okay with that."

"Hey, hey, hey!"

For some reason, Rosa looked quite dissatisfied.

"Curse you, Lina Inverse! Not only do you abandon the hostages, but you pin the crime on someone else! Do you have no conscience!?"

"Daaaah! You're in no position to talk to anyone about conscience!?"

"No more talk! In that case, I definitely can't let you live!"

"Fine by me! Then I'm going to get serious too! Let's go, Naga!"

"Hmph! Leave it to me!"

Naga and I began chanting spells simultaneously.

At that signal, Rosa retreated significantly, and the two assassins stepped forward with daggers in hand. They were likely trying to disrupt our spells and buy time for Rosa’s chanting.

While chanting, I took a firm step forward and drew the short sword at my waist.

The assassins charged without slowing down.

They probably saw me use my sword as a feint before and thought it was just a prop for show.

But I don't carry this thing around for nothing!

Ging!

I easily parried the strike from the first assassin who swung recklessly.

"!?"

They must not have expected me to block. The two assassins looked shaken and retreated slightly.

A moment of staring.

And then, this time, I raised my sword and sprinted toward them!

The two assassins raised their swords to meet me.

HOWEVER!

I had no intention of clashing blades head-on with two professional assassins!

In that split second of staring, my spell was already complete!

"Flare Arrow!"

Hyugogogogou!

"Gaguwa!?"

Hit by a dozen fire arrows fired at point-blank range, the two assassins collapsed easily.

It was the "pretend it's not a feint, but it actually is a feint" attack.

As the assassins fell, I leaped to the side.

And behind me, Naga’s spell was complete!

"Freeze Arrow!"

A dozen arrows of cold air shot straight toward Rosa.

But!

Rosa’s spell was finished at the same time!

She crouched low and pressed her right palm to the earth.

"Dug Haut!"

—What!?

Gogaa!

In response to Rosa’s "word of power," the earth surged.

Soil and stones gathered together, becoming countless spikes piercing the sky!

"Uwoh!?"

Naga and I scrambled to dodge.

We managed to avoid being skewered, but Naga's *Freeze Arrows* were blocked by the earthen spikes and shattered fruitlessly before reaching Rosa.

I hurriedly began chanting my next spell.

I couldn't see Rosa through the spikes created by *Dug Haut*, but I could guess her next move.

Namely—retreat.

That's just the kind of person Rosa is; she knows when to quit. Now that she'd lost her hostages and her assassins, she wouldn't think of staying here to fight the two of us.

But I'm not letting her escape this time! If I don't handle this now, she'll come at me with even more ruthless methods next time.

There was no time to waste going around the obstacles. If there's no path, I'll just make one!

"Behemoth!"

My spell interfered with the earth spirits, creating a tunnel straight through the earthen spikes.

Running into it, I began chanting.

I couldn't see Rosa at the end of the tunnel, but she shouldn't be far. I'll catch up with a flight spell!

Just as I reached the middle of the tunnel...

"Fireball!"

Rosa's voice rang out, much closer than I expected!

——Damn!

Predicting my pursuit, she hadn't run; she'd hidden nearby and prepared a spell.

By the time I realized it, it was too late!

Goun!

The explosion roared nearby.

The surrounding earthen spikes were shattered by the blast and began collapsing toward me all at once!

My spell—won't make it in time!

The moment I prepared myself to be buried alive!

"Vu Vrahymer!"

I heard Naga's voice from behind.

The collapsing debris twisted and swirled in an unnatural direction, forming a dozen dragon puppets!

Even if it was by chance, Naga, nice timing!

If only she could control the spell, I'd have nothing to complain about...

"...Wh...!?"

As my vision cleared, I saw Rosa standing there, stunned by the sudden appearance of the stone dragons!

Shogyoooooon!

The stone dragons howled to the sky and began charging toward Rosa all at once!

"Wait...!? Wait a minute!?"

As Rosa turned and fled, Naga's high-pitched laughter echoed.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! Have you learned your lesson, Rosa Lyman!? The power of Naga the White Serpent!"

"Naga! You did it! Did you finally learn how to control those stone dragon things!?"

"Hmph."

Naga swept her hair back.

"I'm not bragging, but—the stone dragons are just running that way by pure chance."

...I see.

While we were talking:

Gogaa!

One of the stone dragons suddenly shattered!

Then another!

And then Rosa’s voice:

"Hmph! I don't know if you're a Serpent or what, but I'm not so weak that I'd be defeated by some friendless exhibitionist woman!"

"Who are you calling a friendless exhibitionist!?"

"Calm down, Naga!"

I restrained the furious Naga and looked fixedly at Rosa.

"I'm sure she doesn't have any friends either!"

"I... I do! How rude! Even back when I was a court mage, every time I got paid, plenty of people would come up and say, 'Aren't we friends?'!"

"...Weren't they just sponging off you...?"

...What a lonely life she leads...

"That doesn't matter!"

Gogaa!

As if in response to Rosa’s voice, the last stone dragon shattered.

Emerging from behind it was a shadow about the size of an ogre.

—Is that—

A Brass Demon!?

I see. Realizing it was difficult to crush the stone dragons one by one with spells, she summoned this thing to fight.

"Hmph! Anyway, play with this thing I summoned! Lina Inverse! I’ll come back another day! Though if you're defeated by this thing, that’ll be the end of it! Well then..."

"Giga Slave." (Wait, no, that's overkill. Let's go with...)

"Bram Gush!"

Bachon.

Before Rosa could finish her nonsense, my attack spell returned her summoned demon to nothingness instantly.

"...Ah...?"

Rosa froze for a moment at the utter lack of effort it took.

This is what happens when you stand around talking in front of me.

At the same time, I dashed toward Rosa while chanting my next spell!

Should she run or fight? After a moment of hesitation, Rosa began chanting on the spot.

I released my spell first!

"Flare Arrow!"

Without stopping my charge toward Rosa, I fired a dozen fire arrows.

Rosa met them with her own spell!

"Windy Shield!"

The strong wind she created blew my fire arrows off course.

Not yet!

Waiting for the wind to die down, I drew the short sword at my waist while dashing toward Rosa again.

Rosa began chanting for a counterattack.

I threw the sword at her!

"!?"

Though she looked shaken, she managed to dodge it.

—I blocked it!

She probably thought so.

But both the spell and the sword were feints!

Meri.

Exactly as I planned.

My flying kick buried itself perfectly into Rosa’s face.

"—Don't think you've won with this, Lina Inverse."

Even after being tied up by me, Rosa spoke with a defiant smile.

"Even if I am caught like this, as long as there are human rights organizations in this world, a second and third assassin will surely come!"

"You're certainly right about that," I nodded.

"That's exactly why I caught you."

"...What do you mean...?"

I brought my face close to Rosa’s.

"Why don't you tell me? Where that human rights organization is located."

"What do you plan to do once you know?"

"First, we'll have a talk. If that doesn't work——"

"If it doesn't work?"

I clenched my fist firmly.

"Naturally——I’ll crush them!"

"WHAT!?"

"It's for the sake of protecting *my* human rights! In that case, even a human rights organization shouldn't have any complaints about being crushed!"

"There's no way that reckless logic works! That doesn't make any sense!"

"I'm telling you! I won't have you lecturing me on logic!"

For starters, any organization that sends assassins after innocent citizens (just to be clear, I mean me) to protect the rights of villains is a disaster waiting to happen if left alone.

I placed a hand on Rosa’s shoulder.

"So? Where is it?"

"Hmph... you think I’ll tell you after hearing you might crush them?"

"If you won't tell me, I have another idea."

"Oh? And what idea would that be?"

I glanced toward the back of the village.

There, Naga was going around casting healing spells on the villagers we had accidentally blown up.

"If you don't talk, I'll hand you over to the villagers."

"Hmph! Go ahead! What of it!? For starters, the one who actually blew them up was that weird woman you're with!"

"...Do you think the villagers will believe you if you say that?"

"Of course they will! Besides, once I explain the circumstances of why I took them hostage, I'm sure they'll understand!"

Of course, they didn't understand.

"...The... the headquarters is about two days east of the next town over..."

After being thoroughly pummeled by the villagers, Rosa answered my question honestly, a look of fear in her eyes.

Not that she was afraid of me, specifically.

She was looking behind me—at the villagers, who were glaring at her with bloodlust and hostility.

"Yes, yes. Good and honest."

"Hey, lady! You're done with that woman now, aren't you!?"

The voice of Villager #1 came from behind me.

"If you're done, can you hand her over to us? We haven't hit her nearly enough."

A chorus of "Yeah, yeah!" rose from the villagers.

"Eeeeek! No! Please help me!"

As Rosa wailed and shook her head, I leaned in and whispered:

"—If you cooperate, I might help you. If not—I'm handing you back to the villagers."

"I'll cooperate! I'll cooperate!"

Rosa whispered back without hesitation.

"Good. That's a good girl. No matter what I say from now on, don't you dare butt in."

I turned back to the villagers.

"Wait! Everyone! It would be easy to keep hitting her, but if you do that, it'll cause trouble later!"

"...What do you mean!?"

"Explain yourself!"

"Think about it! She says she took you hostage because 'a human rights organization asked her to defeat me'—but do you really think such a fishy story is true?"

Mutter, mutter...

"Now that you mention it..."

"It is a bit much..."

The villagers began to buzz. By throwing a mystery at them, I was turning their anger into curiosity.

"Actually, I thought so too, so I looked into her. And then——"

"And then?"

After a brief silence, I looked away with a serious expression.

"——I found out that a... large organization is involved."

Naga, who didn't know the situation, was nodding along beside me.

"And what is this organization?"

I gave Villager #2 a meaningful look.

"——Are you sure you want to know?"

"...Eh...?"

I continued with a serious face.

"The enemy organization is powerful. If I tell you their true identity here——they might wipe out this village to keep you quiet. That's the kind of people they are. Even so——do you still want to hear it?"

"J-Just kidding!"

"I don't want to get involved in that!"

The villagers shook their heads frantically. The secret art: the "Bold-Faced Lie Attack" to shut down further questioning!

"Don't worry. As long as you don't know anything, the 'Organization' shouldn't bother this village anymore. However——"

I glanced at Rosa.

"If I leave this person in the village, the result will be the same. If their assassin disappears here, they'll surely take action."

"...Then... what should we do...?"

I scratched my head.

"There's only one way. We take her with us. That way, the 'Organization' won't bother the village. ...I'm not thrilled about taking her, but I can't let any more trouble come to this village."

"...I... I see..."

"So, that's how it is. We'll take her. If any strangers come asking about her, just honestly say I took her away. Got it? That's the only way to protect the village."

At my blatant lies, the villagers could only nod in agreement.

"It's here. The headquarters of the 'True Future' human rights organization."

Rosa stopped in a remote mountainous area, far from any towns.

Through the thicket, she pointed to an old building that looked like an ancient ruin—and incredibly suspicious.

It had been about two days since we left the village. During that time, Rosa hadn't made a single move to escape or resist, quietly guiding us here.

——Had she given up, or was she planning something...?

In front of the building stood two rough-looking guards.

...I see. So that's it.

Just as I thought:

"Damu Brass!"

Before I knew she was chanting, Rosa unleashed a spell that cut her ropes, and she sprinted off!

She ran down the mountain slope, through the trees, heading straight for their hideout!

"Naga! After her!"

"Hmph! You don't have to tell me!"

The two of us gave chase.

If my hunch was correct, Rosa's actual clients were likely some bandits with a grudge against me.

There's no way a human rights organization would be based in the mountains with guards dressed like bandits.

Rosa likely only mentioned a "human rights organization" because she figured I'd investigate to see if it were true.

If she had honestly said she was hired by bandits, I would have handed her over to the officials right then and there.

She probably knew she couldn't beat us alone, so she lured us to a base with many allies to overwhelm us with numbers.

That's why she didn't resist.

But if she thinks numbers alone can win, she's dead wrong.

"You guys! Call everyone!"

"What!?"

"You're that...!"

At Rosa’s voice, the two guards looked our way——

"——Dogegge!?"

They screamed simultaneously and scrambled into the building.

Shortly after, about twenty or thirty bandit-looking types swarmed out.

"A lot happened, but I brought her. Lina Inverse."

Standing before the men, Rosa spoke grandly.

"Wait a minute! What are you thinking!?"

One of them—a bearded man with a longsword—shouted in a panic, but Rosa didn't even look at him.

"It's simple. Everyone here attacks at once and defeats Lina Inverse. That's all!"

"...Y-You make it sound so easy...!"

The bearded man broke into a cold sweat. After a moment of silence, he seemed to steel himself and nodded.

"──Fine! If it's come to this, we have to do it! Get her, boys!"

"Yeah!"

At his desperate cry, the other men responded with equal desperation.

"Prepare yourself, Lina Inverse! Once we get serious..."

"Here. Dragon Slave."

Kugooooooon!

With my *Dragon Slave*, the nearby mountain was blown away, changing its shape.

──Well, I could have blown up the hideout, but then I wouldn't be able to take the treasure later.

...Silence...

The entire group went completely silent after that one shot.

Before they could recover:

"Dill Brand!"

Bobaoooon!

Naga's spell sent the entire group, Rosa included, flying.

"...U-Um... for what purpose have you graced us with your presence...?"

Having lost all will to fight after such a total defeat, the bearded man—likely the leader—asked while rubbing his hands together.

The others were still unconscious from Naga's spell. I had only healed this guy so I could ask about the circumstances and the treasure.

"Don't 'for what purpose' me. Tell me. Why did you ask Rosa to assassinate me?"

"A-A-A-Assassination!? I have no idea what you're talking about! We are strictly just a normal human rights organization."

He was drenched in a cold sweat, still trying to play dumb.

"—Haha. I see you don't understand," I said with a smile.

"You probably think, 'If I tell the truth, something terrible will happen to me,' right?"

"...I-Isn't that right...?"

"It is. BUT... if you don't tell me, something even worse will happen."

"Hieeeee! I understand! I understand! As you suspected, we're the survivors of the bandit gangs you've crushed! We gathered here to get revenge on you someday!"

I see. The guards ran because they recognized my face.

"...But we were afraid of being attacked by you again if we kept acting like bandits, so we took the name of a human rights organization!"

My minor threat worked; the man started blabbing.

"WHAT!?"

The one who shouted in response was Rosa, who had recovered at some point.

"Then... the 'human rights organization' part was a lie!?"

"Of course it was! Anyone would notice if they looked at how we're dressed!?"

...She hadn't noticed... Rosa...

"…In any case…" Naga walked over.

"To put it simply…" Rosa said coldly.

I also walked over to the man with a smiling face.

"IT'S ALL YOUR FAULT!!"

Dogemegashish!

A triple-kick from the three of us knocked the bearded man flat.

Rosa swept her hair back.

"…To deceive and use me, who is so innocent of the world’s ways… it’s utterly unforgivable!"

"...Well... I guess you're partly to blame for being fooled by such a lie... but still, firing offensive magic at an inn and taking innocent villagers hostage... that’s going a bit too far for a joke..."

"…W-Wait a minute!"

The man waved his hands frantically as I approached.

"I don't know what that woman did! I just asked her to 'defeat Lina Inverse'! I didn't give her any instructions on the method!"

.....

"…Hmmmm…"

Naga and I turned our glares toward Rosa.

"…Eh…?"

"In other words…"

"YOU'RE ALSO TO BLAME!!"

Dogobo!

A double-punch from Naga and me buried itself perfectly into Rosa's face.

And so.

After handing over the bandit remnants and Rosa to the officials, the incident came to a close.

The treasure at the hideout wasn't anything special, but it was much better than working for free.

Looking back on the incident, I sometimes think:

—Maybe Rosa didn't "leave the country" at all; maybe she was just fired as a court mage...?

The one who knows the truth is now in a jail cell.

(The White Assassin: End)

Being a Goddess of Destruction is Hard Work (Part 1)

"A traveling mage, I presume?"

The man approached me in a small diner in a certain town, right as I was mid-lunch, eating alone.

He looked to be about fifty. To put it kindly, he didn't exactly have the face of a saint—in fact, he was quite blatantly a shifty-looking middle-aged guy. To be blunt, he was suspicious as all get out.

Apparently, my inner thoughts were written all over my face, as the man frantically waved his hands.

"Ah... don't worry. I'm not a suspicious character. I'm the owner of this establishment..."

"Hmm."

I gave a half-hearted reply and went right back to stuffing my face.

"Actually... something's been troubling the neighborhood lately... and I was wondering if I could borrow your strength," the self-proclaimed owner continued, undeterred.

"See, some fellow started a strange religion in this town recently... and they've been doing this persistent door-to-door proselytizing... everyone around here is fed up. Including us. So, I thought... maybe they need a little bit of a lesson..."

"If you want to harass someone, why not just hire some local thugs?"

The owner stiffened for a second at my bluntness.

"...Ah... well... 'harass' is such a nasty word... besides, hiring thugs is... well... the thing is, the leader of this religion is actually a woman. Even if we're being inconvenienced, if I sent a bunch of burly men after her, wouldn't I look like the bad guy?"

...I mean... even if I'm the only one doing the harassing, I'm pretty sure I'd still be the bad guy...

In any case, I had zero intention of taking on such a bothersome job.

"...Why not just solve it through a talk?"

I tossed that out coldly and took a sip of my Will-Apple juice.

"If they were the type you could talk to, I wouldn't be asking this! ...Well, maybe you say that because you don't know the reality of the situation... I mean, they just went and built a shack on

a vacant lot in town and put up a sign that says '**The Church of Lina Inverse**'..."

Pffft-splat!

"...Wai... Wait just a second!?"

At the sudden mention of that very specific name, I accidentally sprayed my juice everywhere and lunged at the owner.

"...Wh... What is it...?"

"Just now... that... the name written on the sign...?"

"The 'Church of Lina Inverse'?"

Aaaaauugh! I knew I didn't mishear it! I reflexively clutched my head and curled up.

Lina Inverse... needless to say, that's my own name. To go and use someone's name for a suspicious religion without permission!

"How dare they! Unforgivable!"

With my left hand still working the fork, I slammed my right fist onto the table.

"...? R-Right? That's exactly why..."

"Whether I take the job or not is one thing!" I barked, cutting off the owner who was trying to agree with me without knowing why I was mad. "...Just tell me. Where exactly is this shack located?"

I stood alone and dazed in front of the building, which was located on the very outskirts of town.

The diner owner called it a "shack," but it was actually a decent, albeit small, well-constructed building. And just as I'd heard, a huge sign hanging by the entrance read: **The Church of Lina Inverse**.

...Hearing about it is one thing, but seeing it in person...

...Ugh... what do I do...?

Part of me just wants to blast it into oblivion with a *Dragon Slave* and act like it never happened...

But since my name is on the sign, I feel like I should at least figure out what's going on...

Then again, another part of me thinks it's better not to get involved at all...

As I stood there agonizing:

"—Excuse me..."

The voice came from behind. I turned around to see a woman standing there, likely on her way

back from shopping, holding a basket full of groceries.

"By any chance... are you a prospective follower?"

A prospective follower!? ...So this woman is... part of it!?

I looked her over once more. She was in her early twenties, a beauty with long silver hair, wearing a very simple tunic. She didn't look like someone from a suspicious cult...

"...Uh... and you are...?"

"Oh. My name is Vilaine, and I'm the leader of this 'Church of Lina Inverse.' Nice to meet you."

She held out her hand. I took it out of habit, and she gripped it firmly.

"Actually, I used to be a shrine maiden for the 'Order of the Red Dragon God'... but the deeper I studied the doctrine, the more contradictions I found... I quit being a shrine maiden and researched various sects, but in the end, they all had contradictions somewhere..."

That's a given. Most religions in the world are made by humans, for humans. The world is full of non-human creatures, but as long as they ignore that and claim "humans are the most important," it's natural for contradictions to pop up.

"...So I thought: If there is no perfect teaching in this world, I will create one with my own hands!" She spoke passionately, still gripping my hand.

"Truth means no contradictions! I tried building various theories, but a contradiction always appeared! But then! I realized—the worship of a God of Destruction!"

"Wait a second!"

"Theoretical contradictions happen because you're trying to save people. If you just destroy everything indiscriminately, there's no contradiction! And when it comes to indiscriminate destruction, everyone talks about Lina Inverse! Thus, our deity is decided: Lina Inverse, the Goddess of Destruction!"

"Wait a second more!"

"—So, how about it? Why don't you join us and give it a try as if your life depended on it?"

"AS IF I WOULD!!" I yelled, wrenching my hand away.

"First of all! You've completely swapped the means and the ends! Wasn't the original goal to save people!?"

"...Setting that aside..."

"DON'T SET IT ASIDE! And above all! I'd appreciate it if you didn't use people's names for such a suspicious thing without asking!"

"...Eh...? People's names...?"

She looked blankly at me. I puffed out my chest.

"I *am* that Lina Inverse."

...There.

Vilaine dropped her basket. "...Eeeeeeeeh!?"

She recoiled with an exaggerated movement. "...No way...!? You look nothing like the image!"

"How should I know!?"

"What do you mean 'How should I know'!? Usually, the skin should be more reddish-black, you should be much larger, and ideally have two or three horns... or at least some meaningful face paint! If not, it's problematic!"

"What do you mean 'problematic'!? I'm the real one, so this is what I look like!"

"No...! Do you really think you can be a proper Goddess of Destruction looking so... normal!?"

"I don't WANT to be one!"

"It's problematic if you're going to be so selfish!"

"I'M the one with the problem here!" I screamed at the top of my lungs.

...Honestly... the world is full of them... people who decide things on their own and then get mad when others don't follow along...

"Anyway! We already have followers! You have to fulfill your responsibility as the Goddess of Destruction!"

"Whaaat!? People actually joined this ridiculous religion!?"

"What do you mean 'ridiculous'!? ...Anyway! It seems we need to talk, but we can't just stand out here. Why don't you—come inside?"

I hesitated for a second. I didn't want to step into such a weird building; I felt like something strange would happen. But then I thought—if she tries anything funny, it's actually a good opportunity. I'll just blast her with an attack spell, hand her over to the guards, and everything will be settled.

"...Fine. Let's go."

I nodded with resolve and began walking toward the building with Vilaine.

The entrance led into a room that, while small, functioned as a chapel. About six cheap wooden pews were lined up on the stone floor. And at the front...

Thud!

I tripped and fell flat on my face. Vilaine looked at me calmly.

"Please watch your step, Lina-san."

"...N-No... I didn't trip... what is *that*...?"

I pointed toward the altar—at a stone statue with slanted eyes, a massive chest, three horns, and six arms. It was the epitome of suspicious.

"It's the statue of our deity, Lina Inverse, of course."

"Aaaaaugh! I knew it!" I clutched my head.

"Please try to become like this as soon as possible."

"NOOOOOOOO!"

I pointed a finger at the statue. "Listen! Suppose someone else made a statue like this and called it 'Vilaine' and started praying to it. How would *you* feel!?"

"Being worshipped by someone is a wonderful thing in itself."

"Gwaaaaahhh!" I started scratching my head in frustration. I can't talk to this woman!

"Anyway! I don't care if you worship a suspicious god or a weird statue, but stop using my name!"

"But now... what about my position...?"

"Shut up! You're the one who ignored *my* position first!"

"Don't say that... it would be such a shame to tell the followers I'm 'giving up' now."

I followed her as she walked further in. "I have no reason to take responsibility!"

"Now, now. Don't get so emotional..." She opened a door at the back of the chapel and pointed inside. "First—let me introduce you. This is our follower, Naga the White Serpent."

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! You're quite late, Lina! ...Though, you did have quite a grand fall just now."

"...N-No... I just wasn't expecting you to pop up here... I wasn't mentally prepared..."

I leaned against the wall, wobbly, but managed to stand up. At the back of the room Vilaine led me to, wearing her usual costume with spiked shoulder guards and a skull necklace, stood the self-proclaimed rival and walking definition of trouble: Naga the White Serpent!

"Are you two acquainted?" Vilaine asked.

"...Y-Yeah..." I answered weakly, then glared at Naga. "...You! Why on earth did you join such a suspicious religion!?"

"Hmph. I ran out of travel funds in this town, and that's when I found this place. I figured if I stayed here, you'd definitely drop by eventually... and it looks like I hit the jackpot.

Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

"Um... we aren't a lost-and-found center for adults..." Vilaine added with a perfect comeback.

"...Let me ask... Vilaine, by any chance, is Naga the *only* follower here...?"

"...Well... I mean... technically..." She looked away and mumbled.

"Hmph. Then it's settled." I pointed a finger straight at Vilaine. "Naga is just a fake follower! That means the actual number of followers is zero! Now there's no reason you can't change the name and the deity!"

"...Urgh! B-But...!" Vilaine faltered.

Yes! One more push! Just as I opened my mouth to deliver the final blow:

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! Don't worry about it, Vilaine!" Naga chimed in. "Lina says that, but she's just being shy!"

"SHY!? I AM NOT!"

"R-Right! No one would normally be upset about being treated as a Goddess of Destruction!"

"NORMALLY THEY WOULD!"

"In that case, Naga-san! We have only one thing to do! We must raise Lina-san to be a grand and proper Goddess of Destruction!"

"LISTEN TO ME!"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! In that case, I, Naga the White Serpent, shall also lend my strength..."

Snap.

"**Dill Brand!**"

Boom!

And so, the headquarters of the "Church of Lina Inverse" vanished along with Vilaine's ambitions in a single blast of my anger... or so I thought. At the time.

"You are Lina Inverse-san, right?"

"...That's ri—pffft!"

I turned around to respond to the voice and ended up spraying my tea everywhere. It had been two or three days since the incident with Vilaine. I was having a late lunch at a diner in a different village.

The person I turned to face, who was now covered in my tea, was a woman standing silently. She was probably trying to go in disguise—wearing a large hat pulled low and hiding her mouth

with a muffler—but her identity was blindingly obvious. It was Vilaine, the "backwards-logic" girl.

Ignoring me as I froze with my knife and fork mid-air, she continued.

"Actually, I have a job I'd like to ask Lina-san to do. The reward... is twenty gold coins."

"Twenty gold coins?"

Since it was Vilaine, I thought she'd ask me to do some "part-time Goddess of Destruction" work for three copper coins, but twenty gold is a fairly reasonable rate for a small job.

She nodded at my repetition. "Yes. There is a place called Cruasal City nearby. If you could go there, announce your name, and then blow up about half the town with an attack spell..."

"AS IF I WOULD!!" I jumped up and pointed at her. "You haven't given up on that stupid plan yet!? You're a sore loser, Vilaine!"

"!?" She froze for a second.

"...Heh... heh heh heh... You saw right through me! Lina Inverse-san! As expected of the one I chose as my Goddess of Destruction!"

She threw off her hat and muffler and pointed back at me.

"To think you'd so easily see through my meticulous plan—disguising myself as a normal client with a normal request, only to subtly have you engage in destructive activities and awaken as a Goddess of Destruction!"

"What part of 'blowing up half a town for twenty gold' is subtle!? ...And besides! Even if you really want to go with the Goddess of Destruction angle, it doesn't have to be me! For example... you could just make do with Naga, who was your fake follower before! She looks the part!"

Vilaine shot down my excellent suggestion instantly.

"What are you talking about!? If I put a statue like *that* in the chapel, people won't know if it's a cult of destruction or a group of people with weird hobbies!"

"...Well... I guess you have a point there..."

"Anyway... it seems Lina-san has no intention of working hard to become a full-fledged Goddess of Destruction..."

"I never had the intention to begin with."

"Hmph... then it can't be helped." Vilaine put her fingers to her mouth.

Phweeeeeeeet!

A shrill whistle echoed through the area.

Bang! Stomp, stomp, stomp!

The diner doors burst open, and about ten men and women of all ages stormed in.

"What are you planning!?"

"I've activated it! My 'Lina Inverse Goddess of Destruction Transformation Project'!"

"Transformation Project!?"

"That's right! Now that this project has started, regardless of your own will, you will be transformed into a magnificent Goddess of Destruction!"

"Hah! Don't make me laugh! How exactly are you going to do that!?"

"Fine! I'll tell you!" She pointed to the group behind her.

"First, this is Team One! I paid them to become followers!"

"...So they're just paid actors..."

"Don't call them that! Anyway! These followers will start holding meetings and recruiting everywhere! Furthermore! Though they aren't here, Team Two, whom I also scouted, will go around various regions using the name 'Lina Inverse' and engaging in destructive activities!"

"WHAAAAAT!?" I cried out.

You... you! Are you trying to ruin my reputation and corner me!? If you're thinking, "Isn't your reputation already low enough?"—you misunderstand me! Vilaine is planning aimless destruction. I *never* destroy things without a reason. Wiping out a mountain to kill a horde of orcs, or blowing up a forest for stress relief—that's the extent of it.

But if, by some chance, people using my name start indiscriminate destruction as Vilaine intends...! Unwarranted bad rumors would spread across the world in an instant, job requests would dry up, and I might even be expelled from the Mages' Association!

And... if by some miracle... those rumors reached the ears of my older sister back in Zephiria! She would come! Definitely! No matter where I am in the world, my sister would come to "punish" me! That—anything but that—must be avoided at all costs!

I glared at Vilaine. "I won't let you! I'll stop your pathetic ambition no matter what!"

I declared grandly and immediately started chanting. But Vilaine looked composed.

"Hmph! It's useless to try and stop us with force! Followers! Protect me!"

At her command, the group behind her moved all at once! They spun on their heels and dashed out the door!

".....Huh.....?"

Leaving only a stunned Vilaine standing there. Well, yeah. There’s no way part-time actors would risk their lives to protect her.

"**Freeze Arrow!**"

Crack!

My shot was true, freezing Vilaine from the waist down.

"——Now then. Why don't you tell me? When, where, and what exactly those self-proclaimed 'Lina Inverses' you hired are going to do?"

We moved from the diner to a small vacant lot nearby, where I began my interrogation. ...Truth be told, I wanted to do it inside, but the diner owner complained, so we had to move outside.

"Hmph. Do you think I'll answer so easily?"

I stared at her in silence for a while, then let a small, menacing smile curl the corners of my mouth.

"...W-What...? What are you planning!?" she cried out, filled with anxiety.

——If you asked me what I was planning, honestly, I hadn't thought of anything in particular. But in a situation like this, silent pressure is often more effective than explaining exactly what you're going to do.

Still silent, I slowly, very slowly, walked toward her.

"Wait...!? Say something!"

I kept walking regardless——

Whish!

It happened at that exact moment. A whistle of wind and a surge of bloodlust.

"————!"

I instinctively jumped back just as several streaks of fire struck the ground at my feet and burst!

Flare Arrow!?

I looked toward the source of the attack. On the roof of a leaning, dilapidated house—like a crow against the blue sky—stood a dark shadow! A middle-aged bald man with a mean look, wrapped in a black cloak.

"——Who are you——!?"

"...Heh heh heh... surely you can guess... I am one of the 'Lina Inverses' hired by Vilaine-sama... Codename: 'The Crimson Destroyer'!"

"...Are you kidding me..."

I could feel a vein throbbing in my temple. If a cute, modest, and well-proportioned beauty were

using my name, that would be one thing... but of all people... a man! A middle-aged bald guy! With such an exaggerated codename!

How dare you! Unforgivable!

Unaware of my internal rage, the man continued pompously.

"Originally, this was an operation to elevate the name of the 'real' Lina Inverse as a Goddess of Destruction... but if you like, I can take over that role right here and now... by defeating the real you!"

"Shut up! **Behemoth!**"

I slammed my right hand onto the ground and released the spell. It's a spell for digging tunnels. Of course, it couldn't directly affect the bald guy standing on the roof.

——At least, not directly.

Creeeeeak-craaaaack!

A magnificent shattering sound was mixed with the bald man's scream. He probably didn't realize that my *Behemoth* spell had collapsed the foundation of the leaning house, leading to its destruction.

And shortly after——

Rumble!

With a spectacular sound, the house collapsed completely.

...Hmm... I didn't think it would fall *that* completely... The foundation must have been really weak.

Well, setting that aside.

I waited for the thick cloud of dust to settle a bit, then stepped over the rubble toward the fallen bald man. Sensing my approach, he twitched and looked up.

"...Urgh... not bad... Even if you caught me by surprise, to defeat me so easily... But... don't get cocky... even if you defeat me... the second and third 'Lina Inverses' are pushing the project forward elsewhere... and I haven't admitted defeat yet..."

"Admit it."

Crunch.

The sole of my boot stepped onto his head——and the bald man successfully stopped moving.

Hmph. Too easy.

——Now then.

Some distractions got in the way, but time to continue Vilaine's interrogation. I spun around and

walked slowly back toward Vilaine, who was still frozen from the waist down. I stopped right in front of her——

"**Vurawaimer** (Spirit Bind)!"

"...Wh...!?"

By the time I cried out, it was too late. My entire body was frozen, unable to move a muscle.

Vurawaimer—a spell often used by priests and shrine maidens to temporarily paralyze an opponent. If left alone, it wears off on its own, but if you're hit with it during battle——needless to say, you're in trouble.

...Too late, I finally remembered. Vilaine used to be a shrine maiden for the Red Dragon God.

She chanted a spell right in front of me——

"**Burst Flare**!"

Boom!

With a non-lethal flame spell, she shattered the ice around her lower body.

"...Hmph. You underestimated me, Lina-san."

She moved behind me, her voice filled with triumph.

"...Vilaine... I didn't think... you had... a hidden card... like that..."

I managed to squeeze out the words. My mouth felt slightly numb, but I could still talk. I could probably chant a simple spell, but Vilaine would definitely escape or knock me out before I could finish.

She said smugly, "Well, I couldn't exactly chant a spell in front of you while I was stuck like that. Thanks to him distracting you, I'm saved. Oh, don't worry. I'm not going to do anything to you now. After all, you have to grow into a magnificent Goddess of Destruction for us. That spell will wear off on its own in time. Well then——I must get back and continue the plan."

Vilaine's voice cut off, and her presence faded as she walked away.

——Y-You... Vilaine!

I let my guard down because I thought she was just a ditz, but I won't fail next time! I will definitely crush that ambition!

Standing paralyzed in the middle of the lot, I swore it in my heart!

(Being a Goddess of Destruction is Hard Work: To be continued!)

Preview

The Goddess of Destruction Transformation Project is finally underway!

Will Lina be able to stop Vilaine’s grand design!?

Or is she destined to walk the path of a Goddess of Destruction forever!? (Fat chance!)

Next time: "Being a Goddess of Destruction is Hard Work" (Part 2)!

Being a Goddess of Destruction is Hard Work (Part 2)

Synopsis

There are plenty of suspicious religions in this world, but the one Lina stumbled upon this time is a cult led by a woman named Vilaine. Its name? **The Church of Lina Inverse!**

Realizing she'd never get Lina's consent to become their deity, Vilaine has officially launched the "Lina Inverse Goddess of Destruction Transformation Project."

Her terrifying plan: hire imposters to commit acts of destruction in Lina's name across the land, dragging Lina's reputation even further into the gutter!

Can Lina stop this project before her name is mud?

"**Dill Brand!**"

BOOM!

With a single blast of my attack spell, "Lina Inverse" sent up a pathetic scream and went flying.

Alright. That makes four of them.

...Still...

I walked over to the twitching, scrawny-looking guy, grabbed him by the collar, and hauled him up.

"W-What was that for!? Out of nowhere!?"

I ignored his question. "...You. Do you happen to know how many 'Lina Inverses' Vilaine hired?"

"I-I don't know!" The guy shook his head frantically, his eyes wide with terror. "Some girl I liked approached me and said, 'If you call yourself Lina Inverse and do some destructive stuff, I'll go on a date with you.' I did it with the purest of intentions..."

"...By graffitiing a wall...?"

"Yes! So please—"

"**Bomb Di Wind!**"

KABOOM!

My second blast of righteous fury made sure he wouldn't be moving for a while.

Good grief.

I let out a small sigh and looked at the wall. In giant red letters, it said: **LINA INVERSE WAS HEAR.**

Exactly. I happened to catch this guy in the act, realized he was one of Vilaine's fakes, and naturally blasted him. Using someone else's name for a date is unforgivable enough... but what's worse is that he **misspelled** the word!

Now *I* look like the idiot!

I can handle being called short-tempered or a "bandit-killer" (even if it's mostly true), but if rumors start spreading that "Lina Inverse is illiterate," I am actually going to lose it.

"She really isn't picky about her methods or her people, is she...?" I muttered while washing the graffiti off the wall.

Vilaine's plan was twofold: have imposters ruin my name with "destruction" while paid shills spread the religion elsewhere.

...However...

The first fake I met was a middle-aged bald guy who at least used actual magic.

The second was a thuggish-looking brute. The third was a girl who skipped out on a restaurant bill.

And the fourth was this graffiti brat.

At this rate, I'm waiting for "The Fake Lina Inverse Who Puts Her Trash Out on the Wrong Day" to show up.

Either she's out of money or just doesn't know how to scout talent; they're all so small-scale. (Though obviously, if they did *large-scale* destruction in my name, I'd have a different set of problems.)

Regardless, if I don't find Vilaine herself and take her down, the number of fakes will just keep growing. As I walked down the street, pondering my next move...

"Hey, hey, babe! My name's Lina Inverse. How 'bout we grab some tea—"

"**Dill Brand!**"

K-POW!

My spell sent "Fake Lina #5," who was busy hitting on girls, soaring into the sky.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

I heard that unmistakable, neighborhood-nuisance laugh the moment I entered the next town. Following the sound, I arrived at a small diner.

BAM!

I kicked the door open. The laughing stopped instantly.

Standing atop a round table in the center of the room was the very person I was looking for. I pointed a finger straight at her.

"I finally found you! Naga!"

Yes. Standing there, chest puffed out with unnecessary pride, was the self-proclaimed rival and "goldfish poop" herself, Naga the White Serpent!

Technically, I was looking for Vilaine, but Naga had been helping her with the project earlier. I figured Naga—being half-bored and half-spiteful toward me—was still involved.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! I shall praise you for finding me, Lina Inverse!" Naga boasted.

...I didn't exactly "find" her; I just asked if anyone had seen "a loud, weirdly-dressed woman laughing like a maniac."

"But you're mistaken, Lina! Right now, I am not 'Naga the White Serpent.' I am 'Lina Inverse'!"

"I knew it! You're still part of Vilaine's plan! You know where she is, don't you? Tell me right now!"

"Ho-ho-ho! You make me laugh! Do you really think that I, the great... I mean, 'Lina Inverse,' would just spill the beans!?"

I gave her a sly grin. "I didn't think so. Which means..."

"Hmph. You want to do this by force? Fine! Let's take this outside!"

With a flourish of her cape, Naga leaped off the table.

Now!

Just as she was about to land, I casually swept her legs.

Trip.

Thud!

Naga lost her balance and fell flat on her face. Before she could get up, I sat right down on her back.

"Oof!? ...H-Hey, Lina...!"

I looked down at her. "Heh heh heh... sorry, but I'm not in the mood for your games. You know what I want, right?"

"...Your eyes aren't laughing, Lina..."

"Of course they aren't! I don't know when you joined Vilaine, but you are the **twenty-third** 'Lina Inverse' I've dealt with today! Twenty-three! I'm at my breaking point! You're lucky I didn't just start with a Fireball!"

"...Fine... fine! I'll tell you where Vilaine is... for about twenty gold—"

"**Fireball!**"

KABOOM!

My point-blank shot sent Naga flying high into the air.

"Hmph. It's here."

Naga led me to a mountain not far from town.

"In the middle of these woods?" I asked skeptically.

"Yes. She said that for a Goddess of Destruction headquarters, a secret mountain assembly is the 'formal style.' She has quite the admirable policy."

"Policies, huh...? So it's deep in the mountains?"

"No need to worry. She said if the headquarters is too far in, it’s a pain to go buy groceries, so she kept it close by."

"...I see." So she has a policy... except when it’s inconvenient.

After hiking for a bit, a set of ancient ruins appeared among the trees. It looked like an old temple, covered in ivy and radiating a certain majestic aura.

"Wow... she actually found a place with some atmosphere. Anyway, let's head in. And Naga? Don't you dare betray me the second we get inside."

"Hmph! What a foolish question, Lina! The only things that can move the heart of Naga the White Serpent are justice, logic, truth, cash, food, my current mood, and the day's temperature and humidity!"

"Don't brag about having zero convictions! ...Anyway, if this goes well, I'll buy you dinner. Twice."

"Hmph! In that case, I promise I won't betray you. You can even call me your 'Best Friend' if you like."

"Absolutely not."

We entered the ruins. Despite the exterior, the inside was well-maintained. There was no damp smell, and magical lights flickered on the walls. There was no sign of anyone, but since the "organization" lacked members, they were likely all out doing "destruction" or proselytizing.

Eventually, we reached a chapel-like room with pews and that same suspicious statue.

"Hmm..." I scanned the room. Total silence.

"Hmph. It seems she's out," Naga said, tossing her hair.

Right then...

“Hmph. It seems you really did betray me, Naga-san.”

The voice came from nowhere. It was definitely Vilaine.

"Vilaine!?"

“Long time no see, Lina-san. It seems you still lack the awareness of a proper Goddess of Destruction...”

"I'M NOT GOING TO HAVE THAT! Now show yourself!" I yelled at the walls.

She wasn't hiding nearby; her voice sounded muffled, like it was coming through a speaking tube.

“Since you and Naga-san are acquaintances, I anticipated her betrayal to some extent. And so...”

Vilaine’s voice went silent.

"Hmph! What's the matter? Can't think of a clever threat?" Naga mocked.

But in that instant, I felt a chill.

Snap.

BOOM!!

The ruins exploded, collapsing right on top of us!

"Ugh... *cough*...!"

I shook the dust off and stood up from the rubble. Because I’d sensed something was wrong, I’d cast a defensive spell just in time. I was fine.

As for Naga...

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

Crash!

Naga burst out from the rocks, completely unscathed. She immediately pointed at me. "How dare you use me as a shield against the falling debris, Lina Inverse! But if you think that could defeat Naga the White Serpent, you are naive!"

...Actually, I used her as a shield precisely because I knew it *wouldn't* kill her.

"Vilaine blew up the ruins! She knew we were coming and set a trap! Are you really going to let her get away with this!?"

"Hmph! Now that you mention it, I feel like I shouldn't let her run free!"

Naga was easily swayed, turning her fury toward Vilaine. Perfect! Naga was now a full-time ally. (Though some would argue having Naga as an ally is a disaster in itself.)

Still, if things went south, I could just blame her and run. (Am I a villain? Maybe.)

"Let's go find her!"

"Right!"

Two days later, in a diner in a small town...

"So, Lina, how long do we have to do this?" Naga complained.

We were fired up to take Vilaine down, but we couldn't find her. Based on where I'd found the fakes, her range was small—three or four towns at most. But that was still too much ground for just the two of us.

So, while I continued to beat up every "Fake Lina" I found, I also started spreading a rumor: *"Anyone calling themselves Lina Inverse will meet a horrible fate."*

Since it was true, the rumor spread fast. It was meant to scare off her recruits.

"Don't worry, Naga. If this works—"

BAM!

The door flew open. A silhouette stood against the sunlight.

"You've really done it... as expected of Lina-san..."

I glanced at Vilaine, who was wearing a smile twitching with rage.

"...If this works, the target comes to us," I finished.

Vilaine led us to a vacant lot on the edge of town.

"I guess my rumors worked," I said.

"Indeed. Ever since those rumors started, no one will accept the role of 'Lina Inverse,' no followers are joining, and the paid shills ran off with the money!"

"Wait, those last two aren't my fault—"

"YES THEY ARE!" She pointed at me. "If you had just accepted your role as a Goddess of

Destruction from the start, none of this would have happened!"

"Stop shifting the blame! You're the one who used my name without asking!"

"Setting that aside for a moment!"

"DON'T SET IT ASIDE!"

"I'll ask one last time! Are you coming with me to be our Goddess or not!?"

"NO!"

Vilaine gave a small smile. "...If you won't listen even after I've persuaded you with such sincerity... then talk is useless."

Sincerity? Where!?

"In that case, I will make you our deity by force!"

"Bring it on!"

She snapped her fingers!

Suddenly, the ground beneath us gave way! A pit trap!?

"GYAAAAAAAH!" Naga screamed as she plunged into the deep hole.

But then...

"...Wh-What!?" Vilaine was the one screaming in shock.

I was hovering calmly above the open pit.

"Levitation!? Since when!?"

"Since we left the diner, obviously."

I floated down to the edge. "I figured you were fond of surprises, like that trap in the mountains. I wasn't about to walk into another trap unprotected."

"Impressive, Lina-san! Then—we fight fair! Everyone!"

At her call, three men appeared from behind walls and bushes. They looked like they could actually fight, unlike the previous fakes.

But they shouldn't underestimate me! I am Lina Inverse! I don't lose in a head-on fight!

And more importantly, there was one thing Vilaine had completely forgotten!

Dash!

I suddenly turned and bolted!

"Don't let her—!"

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!"

A brain-rattling laugh interrupted her. Vilaine and her men froze.

Then...

ROAR!

A massive Black Dragon stuck its head out of the pit!

"WHAAAAAT!?" Vilaine and the men shrieked.

Understandable. It was a **Plasma Dragon**, the strongest of the dragon race. Seeing one pop out of a hole is enough to terrify anyone.

Of course, it hadn't just been sitting there. The person who summoned it was standing right on its head.

"Ho-ho-ho! You've tried quite a few things, Vilaine! But now that you've made an enemy of Naga the White Serpent, I hope you're prepared! Get them, Plasma Dragon!"

The dark dragon let out a mighty roar!

"Waaaaagh!" Naga lost her balance and fell off its head. (That's what you get for standing there.)

The dragon's front foot accidentally stepped on her. *Squish.* (She's Naga; she'll live.)

The dragon then proceeded to effortlessly scatter Vilaine and her group.

"Heh... that's what happens when you underestimate Naga's stupidity," I chuckled from a safe distance.

Wait—this is no time to chuckle! Naga is flattened, which means the dragon is acting on a very vague command: "Get them!" If I don't do something, it'll level the town.

It was already heading toward the town center. I had to stop it.

But how? A *Dragon Slave* would kill it, but it would also take the town with it. Small spells wouldn't work.

The best way would be to have Naga control it, but she was currently embedded in the dirt somewhere.

I ran over to Vilaine, who was lying dazed on the ground, and hauled her up by the collar.

"Vilaine! Get a hold of yourself! Help me stop that thing!"

"Urgh... Wh-What!? Why should I—"

"Stop complaining or I'll throw you in front of it!"

"Eep!"

"Besides, if we stop it, your 'reputation' might actually go up!"

"...I see! Fine! But nothing dangerous!"

"Don't worry. You can use *Elmekia Lance*, right?"

"Yes, I can manage that..."

I pointed at the dragon. "Get closer and hit it with one."

"That sounds plenty dangerous!"

"It'll be fine! I have a plan! Just fire the spell and then run straight back toward me as fast as you can!"

"O-Okay... I'll do it!"

Vilaine ran toward the dragon, chanted, and fired. "**Elmekia Lance!**"

The spear of light struck the dragon. Since it attacks the spirit, it would knock a human out cold, but against a Plasma Dragon, it just made it angry.

The dragon turned its hostly gaze on Vilaine. It let out a roar and charged!

"GYAAAAAAAH!" Vilaine turned and sprinted back.

She ran across the vacant lot. "Lina-san! Now!!"

I didn't answer. I stayed hidden, watching.

"Lina-san!? Where are you!? This wasn't the deal!!" she screamed as she flew past, the dragon hot on her heels, heading out of town.

Heh... just as planned!

My "plan" was simple: use Vilaine as bait to lure the dragon out of town so I could blast it safely.

Don't call me a liar. I said "It'll be fine" and "I'll guarantee safety," but I never said *whose* safety!

Once they were well outside the town limits...

"**Dragon Slave!**"

KABOOM!

My blast successfully wiped out the Plasma Dragon... and one other person.

And so, the incident came to an end.

If you're thinking, "Wait, Vilaine's project isn't solved," you lack life experience.

After the blast, I found a dizzy (but alive) Vilaine, gagged her, and handed her over to the guards as "The Culprit Behind the Dragon Incident."

When she finally talks, she'll tell the truth, but by then, Naga and I will be far away. And since the guards will find out she was running a "Destruction Cult," they won't believe a word she says anyway.

Moral of the story:

No matter what people say about you, your daily conduct is what truly matters.

(Being a Goddess of Destruction is Hard Work: End)

Departure of the Songstress

"Did a woman run in here!?"

As the door slammed open—

The man’s arrogant bark caused the patrons of the diner to fall into a momentary silence.

He looked to be in his late twenties. A bit scrawny, with sharp, piercing eyes.

He stomped toward the back of the establishment.

"Did anyone see her!? About fifteen or sixteen years old..."

"I wouldn't know. Never heard of her."

Cutting the man off, a voice rang out through the shop—none other than mine, Lina Inverse.

"...Hm?"

The man stopped in his tracks and turned a sour gaze toward me. I didn't flinch.

"Stomping into a place where people are trying to eat... if you’d come in politely and asked 'Excuse me, have you seen...', you might have actually been likable. But 'I wouldn't know' is all you get when you come in acting like a king. Honestly... if you want to ask people for favors, go learn some common sense first."

"Why, you...!"

Despite my sincere advice, the man’s face flushed with pure rage. He reached into his coat.

Whoa, hey now!

The moment I stood up from my chair, the man whipped his hand out. Firmly gripped in his fist were several small throwing knives!

You’re really going for it!? I know people are short-tempered these days, but come on!

"Wait—!"

Before I could even finish my warning—

The man’s right hand blurred!

But his aim was sloppy! The first knife whistled past me by a wide margin—

Clang!

The sharp sound of metal hitting metal rang out right behind me.

At the same time—

"Move!"

Following a girl’s clear voice, the table I had been sitting at just moments ago suddenly flew into the air! It soared straight toward the man with the knives!

"Guh—!?"

He didn't even have time to scream.

CRASH-THUD-WHAM-CRACK!

Taking the full force of the table, the man was blown backward, smashing through other tables before collapsing into a motionless heap.

...A low murmur filled the shop.

The customers weren't looking at me—their eyes were fixed behind me.

I had a feeling I knew why. That voice from behind... I recognized it.

I slowly turned around.

There, standing in a pigeon-toed pose, was the suit of full-plate armor I had assumed was just a decoration for the shop.

...Which meant, as expected...

"Natalie!?"

"Oh, Lina! It's been so long!"

Yes—it was Natalie. The singing, talking, living suit of armor I’d met before—possessing invincible strength and the heart of a hopeless romantic.

"You ran away!?"

"Yeah... actually..."

Natalie gave a small metallic nod across the table.

We had relocated to a different table after the knife-thrower had been tied up and gagged. Usually, the rule for these situations is to leave the scene of the trouble entirely, but it turned out the man was looking for Natalie herself.

The knife he threw hadn't been aimed at me; it was aimed at her. The "fifteen or sixteen-year-old" description matched Natalie (who claims to be sixteen).

...Of course, there are questions like *why bother throwing a knife at a Living Mail* or *who else on earth would recognize that description as a suit of armor*, but regardless, Natalie's immediate counterattack confirmed they were in a hunter-and-prey relationship.

If she was being hunted, going outside was risky. A giant suit of armor acting like a dainty teenage girl is... conspicuous, to say the least. Walking the streets would be like putting up a billboard saying "I'm right here!"

So, despite the stares from the other customers, we stayed put.

The shopkeeper looked miserable about it, though.

"So you ran... but Natalie, didn't you really like that village?"

Last I heard, after our previous adventure, she was making a living (?) singing in a nearby village.

"No, no, Lina," she said, her helmet clanking as she shook her head. "I didn't run away from the village. I ran away from a traveling troupe!"

"A traveling troupe?"

"Yes..."

She crossed her metal arms and turned her faceplate toward the distance. "For a while, I sang at the village tavern. It was a small place, but so much happened... The warm gazes of the villagers... a fleeting romance with a traveling minstrel in a pointy hat clutching a guitar... There was even a pervy old man who kept trying to buy me drinks. I wonder what he planned to do once I was drunk? Oh, Natalie was in such danger!"

".....I see."

I responded with a strained smile. If a normal girl talked like this, I'd just tell her she was being annoying and smack her, but when a black-polished Living Mail does it with flowery poses... I have no idea how to react. (Also, what was that old man thinking, trying to get a suit of armor drunk?)

"Anyway, lots of things happened. But you know, being a Living Mail is hard. Once you get used to a peaceful life, you start craving excitement. I started wondering if I should spend my whole life in that village, or if the wide world and wonderful encounters were waiting for me... That's when the troupe came to town."

She leaned back in her chair, looking exhausted. Despite her size, the chair didn't break—she's hollow, after all, so she probably only weighs as much as a large man.

With a metallic sigh, she continued.

"The ringmaster scouted me... and I just said 'I'll go.' Don't laugh, Lina! At the time, it sounded so dreamy. Me, singing on a stage under the lights. Interacting with fans. Saving my salary for

my wedding fund... meeting someone wonderful and heading for the goal-in!"

Goal-in? To where exactly? I mentally retorted.

"But once we started traveling, it was completely different! They told me I'd be singing, but all they made me do was wrestle grizzlies and ogres!"

"Well... that is definitely a different job description."

"Right!? And that's not all! When I complained, the ringmaster said, 'The customers like that better! If you keep whining, I won't pay you as punishment!' And he actually stopped paying me!"

"What!?"

Unpaid wages! Oh, how hideous those words sound, even when they're someone else's problem!

"I couldn't take it anymore, so I ran. But the ringmaster got angry and sent pursuers to bring me back." Natalie glanced at the tied-up 'Knife-Throwing Jack.' "He's one of them."

"I see... a very straightforward name."

"I've been hiding in this shop, pretending to be a waitress..."

Wait, she was pretending to be a waitress? I thought she was pretending to be a statue...

"Then he showed up and found me. But meeting you here is lucky! Lina, please, escort me back to my village!"

"Escort you? Do you not remember the way?"

"That too, but look at me—unlike you, I can't use a single spell. It's too dangerous for a girl to travel alone!"

"Well... it *is* dangerous for a girl to travel alone, I suppose..."

But YOU should be fine! I shouted in my head.

I was torn.

Taking Natalie back to the village wasn't a problem; I didn't have anything better to do. But my policy doesn't allow for pro bono work. Since she hadn't been paid, she obviously didn't have a reward for me.

Still, flat-out refusing felt cold.

So, I decided to follow the standard procedure.

"Is that really enough, Natalie?" I asked, looking her straight in the visor.

"Huh? Enough... what?"

"You think it's over once you get back to the village, but they might follow you there. They've followed you this far, after all."

"No way!"

"Yes way. They'll check the village first thing. So, what are you going to do?"

Natalie rattled with fear. I held up a finger.

"There's only one way! We attack them first and beat them until they can't fight back!"

"But... isn't that a crime?"

"Natalie, listen! They tricked you and stole your wages! That's the real crime! Anything we do is just self-defense. It's not a crime if they started it!"

"Is... is that how it works?"

"That's how the world works! And while we're at it, we'll take your unpaid wages, some extra for 'emotional distress,' and my consulting fee! It's perfectly fine!"

"That sounds like robbery..."

"Natalie! You can stay quiet and play the 'generous victim,' but these guys will just find someone else to trick! There will be a second and third victim!"

"I... suppose..."

"Exactly! To prevent more victims, someone—us!—has to stop them!"

Natalie fell silent, thinking it over. Finally, she looked up.

"I understand, Lina! It's a little scary, but Natalie will do her best!"

Yes! Income source secured!

"Alright! Once we finish eating, we'll wake up Jack over there, make him talk, and launch our attack!"

Thick clouds turned the afternoon sky a heavy gray.

In the middle of a vast grassland sat a giant, gaudily colored tent. It looked completely out of place in the middle of nowhere. Jack had confessed the location quite easily.

There were no customers or members in sight. It was likely off-hours, and the rest of the troupe was probably out searching for Natalie.

"This is the tent. No doubt about it," Natalie whispered, her armor clanking slightly.

"Why on earth are they out here?"

"I don't know. Usually, they pitch the tent near towns..."

Strange. What are they up to?

Regardless, our mission remained the same.

"Let's go, Natalie."

"Okay... but don't leave me, I'm scared!"

We headed toward the entrance.

"The carriages where everyone sleeps should be behind the tent."

"Got it. We'll cut through the tent."

"Through it!? Shouldn't we go around?"

"Normally, yes. But in an open field like this, we'll be spotted if we walk around the outside. We'll burst through the front, attack anyone inside to cause chaos, and break through the back. If they spot us, they spot us."

"Okay. I'll leave the tactics to you, Lina."

We dashed toward the entrance. Natalie's running was incredibly loud (*clank-clank-clank!*), but no one came out.

We burst inside.

The interior was a hollow space. Log benches for the audience were lined up around a fenced-off stage area. Beyond that was a prop gate leading to the "backstage."

It was dim, lit only by the faint light filtering through the colored fabric of the tent. We didn't slow down, heading straight for the prop gate.

"Welcome home, Natalie."

A man's low voice echoed through the tent just as we reached the stage.

"That voice! The Ringmaster!"

Natalie stopped and looked around frantically. I did the same, but couldn't see anyone.

"I thought you might try a surprise attack. I'm glad my prediction was right; it saves me the trouble of searching. And the girl with you... a hired hand, I presume?"

He knew I was there. He wasn't just hearing Natalie's clanking; he was watching us.

Natalie scanned the area, then—

"There!"

She scooped up a pebble and threw it at the audience seating.

Thud.

"Oof!?"

With a groan, one of the "logs" on the benches suddenly stood up!

...Are you kidding me?

"He pretends to be a log to scare the audience. It's his specialty: 'Audience Metamorphosis,'" Natalie explained.

The fake log split in two, and a scrawny man in a tuxedo stepped out.

"Heh heh... as expected, that trick doesn't work on Natalie."

"I mean... bragging about such a cheap trick is a bit much," I muttered.

The Ringmaster's eyes flared. "Cheap!? I put my heart into this!"

He was clearly sensitive about it. I shrugged.

"I get it. But you're not actually a circus performer, are you?"

His eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?"

"A normal troupe wouldn't cancel shows and send everyone out just to find one runaway. Usually, they'd just cut their losses."

"What do you mean, Lina?" Natalie asked.

"I mean this 'Ringmaster' had a very specific reason to bring Natalie back. Right?"

The man stayed silent.

"Wait—!" Natalie gasped. "Is it... my body!? Is he after my body!?"

"NO!" The Ringmaster and I yelled in unison.

"Well... your phrasing is terrible, but in a way, you're right," I said.

The Ringmaster let out a small groan.

"Lina, explain!"

"If my guess is right," I pointed at the man, "he's a remnant of the group that created you, Natalie. The 'Merchants of Death.' They were weapon developers for various countries. Most of them were arrested, but not all. To rebuild their organization, they need money. And the fastest way to get money is to sell a finished product."

"No way! Then...!"

"Exactly. They formed a fake circus to 'scout' you. They travel around, making you fight bears and ogres to collect 'combat data.' Then they take you to a buyer in a big city and sell you off. Simple, right?"

The Ringmaster smirked. "You know about the organization? I heard a female mage helped Natalie when the law came for us. I take it that was you?"

"Bingo. So, why don't you just give up—"

Before I could finish, the Ringmaster bolted for the exit.

"Hey! He’s running! After him!"

We chased him to the entrance. He stopped and pulled a rope hanging by the door.

Oh, you've got to be kidding!

Tug!

The entire tent wobbled, the poles shifted, and the heavy fabric came crashing down!

"KYAAAAAA!"

We were buried under mountains of gaudy fabric. For Natalie, it was just a delay, but if we were attacked from above while trapped, I’d be in trouble.

I quickly chanted.

"**Dug Haut!**"

I used the earth-interference spell to create a tunnel leading from our feet to the exit.

"Natalie! This way!"

We crawled through the tunnel and emerged outside, just in time to see the Ringmaster running toward a group of carriages behind the tent. But then—

WHOOSH!

A violent gust of wind whipped the grass. A shadow soared into the sky from the carriages.

"A Wyvern!?"

A Wyvern is a dragon with wings but lower intelligence and no breath weapon. This one was small for its kind. And perched on its back, in a saddle, was the Ringmaster!

"Hahaha! No matter how strong Natalie is, she can't reach me up here!"

"But... you can't reach her either, can you?"

"Naïve! I have a countermeasure for that!"

He pulled the reins, and the Wyvern opened its maw.

Breath!?

No—a glob of white slime shot out.

"Whoa!"

Natalie and I dove apart as the slime hit the ground with a wet *splat*. It was gross and white, but as soon as it landed, it turned transparent and hardened like ice.

I threw a pebble at it.

Ting.

It bounced right off.

"The capture beast!" the Ringmaster shouted from above. "Its mucus hardens instantly upon contact with air! No matter how much power Natalie has, if she's encased in this, she can't break free! Now, what will you do!?"

Simple.

"**Dragon Slave.**"

BOOM!!!!

The blast completely vaporized the fake Wyvern in mid-air.

Heh. That's what happens when you underestimate me.

The evil Ringmaster was gone, and we took the unpaid wages and my fee from the carriages. Happy ending!

...Or so I thought.

WHOOSH!

The sky darkened again just as we reached the nearest town.

I looked up.

"No way...!"

The Ringmaster was back, riding *another* Wyvern!

"I thought I killed you!"

"You killed the Wyvern! But I jumped off at the last second, and I had more than one!" he laughed.

"Lina! Use that spell again!" Natalie cried.

"I can't! We're in the middle of town!"

If I fired a *Dragon Slave* at a low-flying target here, I'd level half the buildings. The Ringmaster knew that.

"You won't escape this time!"

He pulled the reins. Slime globs started raining down. Natalie and I dashed through the streets, dodging the sticky projectiles.

"Natalie! In here!"

I bolted into a nearby diner.

"Good idea! He can't reach us inside! Lina, you're so smart!"

"Heh, well—wait, the problem is how to take them down—"

KABOOM!

An explosion blew a hole through the wall of the diner.

"Gwah!?"

I hit the floor. When the dust cleared, the wall was scorched.

Fireball!?

"Hiding is useless! I know a bit of attack magic myself!" the Ringmaster shouted from outside.

So he wasn't just a "log" specialist!

Fire wouldn't hurt Natalie’s armor, but it would definitely kill me. It was the perfect way to remove me and capture her.

"Lina, what do we do!?"

"We move! Now!"

I chanted while jumping through the debris. The Wyvern followed us from above. I tried to time a spell to knock it down.

"**Icicle Lance!**"

The ice arrows flew toward the Wyvern, but—

"Not today!"

The Wyvern flapped its wings, creating a gust of wind that shattered my ice arrows.

Tch! Fine, something less affected by wind!

I kept running with Natalie.

"Got you!"

More slime globs flew down.

"Eek!?"

Natalie tripped. A glob had caught her right ankle. It hardened instantly.

"I can't move it!"

She struggled, but she couldn't break it.

"Fine! **Vibrate!**"

I fired a vibration spell at her ankle.

Crack!

The transparent shell shattered like glass.

"Natalie, you okay?"

"Yeah! Barely!"

We dove into a general store.

"Lina, he's going to get us!" Natalie wailed.

"Hmm..." I hummed. I needed him to lower his guard. Using Natalie as a decoy wouldn't work; he was too experienced. And Natalie was too scared to play the part anyway.

Wait... maybe I could use that to my advantage?

"Natalie, I have an idea. I need your help."

The Ringmaster looked down from the Wyvern. He saw Natalie emerge from a building and start running down the street alone.

He hesitated. *Where is the mage?*

But Natalie was heading for the edge of town. If she reached the open fields, I'd be free to use my big spells again.

He decided to go for it.

He chased her, eyes darting around for me, occasionally firing slime globs.

"Hiyah!?"

One caught Natalie's leg. She stumbled. Then another caught her arm. Soon, her limbs were encased in the hardened shell. She stopped moving.

The Ringmaster hovered above, still wary. Recovering her was the most dangerous part—that's when his movement would be limited. He was waiting for me to strike.

...Which was exactly what I was doing.

Thinking the coast was clear, he lowered the Wyvern toward her.

Just as the Wyvern’s claws reached out to grab her—

I triggered my spell.

"**Vibrate!!**"

"What!?"

CRASH!

My point-blank shot shattered the Wyvern’s head.

The Ringmaster was thrown to the ground as the beast collapsed.

"You... you were...!" He glared at me, trying to stand.

"**Icicle Lance!**"

Thwack-thwack-thwack!

The ice arrows pinned him down for good.

"**Vibrate!**"

Snap!

I shattered the shells on Natalie’s limbs, and she stood up.

"Phew... it worked, Lina!"

"Told you it would," I said—from inside the helmet.

Yes. I wasn't hiding in a building. I was inside Natalie.

Since Living Mail is hollow and oversized, I had folded my limbs and climbed inside her torso. The Ringmaster was so worried about an outside ambush that he never expected the attack to come from his target.

"Well, that's that. Natalie, let me out now."

"Lina..." Natalie whispered.

"What?"

"That was... my first time."

".....Huh?"

"I'm a Living Mail, right? I've never actually been *worn* by someone before. But having you inside me today... it wasn't so bad! Oh, Natalie is so embarrassed!"

She started fidgeting, which caused the entire suit of armor to shake violently.

"Hey—stop! Stop shaking! I'm getting motion sick!"

"Oh, sorry! But Lina, I was thinking... do you want to keep traveling like this?"

"Please... just let me out..." my voice was pathetically weak.

The Ringmaster and his remnants were arrested, and Natalie went back to her village to sing at the tavern. But her dream changed slightly.

Instead of "marrying a handsome prince," she now dreams of "being worn by a handsome, strong warrior and traveling together."

So, a word of advice. If you're a mercenary and you happen to see a suit of armor singing in a tavern... think twice before you put it on.

(Departure of the Songstress: End)

Afterword

Author: Sorry to keep you waiting, everyone! And so, here it is: *Slayers Special* Volume 10, *The Destroyer's Burden*!

L: ...Not that it matters, but... is this title okay?

Author: Mm-hmm. Even I, the author, had my doubts... At first, there was talk of calling it *The Songstress's Departure*, but the editorial department kept screaming, "Whaaaaaat!? Isn't it supposed to be *The Destroyer's Burden*!?" until we ended up with this title.

L: Good grief... It sounds like a tribute to that one famous actor... By the way, why is *The Destroyer's Burden* in this volume when it was supposed to be released much later?

Author: Meow. That's because they decided to use that story for the *Slayers* radio drama.

L: I see. ...But man, this *Slayers* thing just keeps going, doesn't it? TV, movies, then radio, then *NEXT*, *RETURN*, then radio again... It never ends! I guess it's all thanks to me!

Author: ...Is... is that so...?

L: It is. But if that's the case, are you doing something again next year?

Author: As far as that's concerned, at this stage, it's a s-e-c-r-e-t.

L: Saying "it's a secret at this stage" is basically the same as saying "we're definitely doing something." ...Speaking of "doing something," what about that *Slayers* popularity poll—?

S: Ladiiiiiies and gentlemen! Thank you for waiting!

L: Whoa, you scared me! Don't just pop out like that! I thought my heart was going to stop!

Author: You don't even have a heart.

L: Hmph. It was just a figure of speech. ...Anyway, you're looking pretty pumped today, Subordinate S.

Author: Yeah. I didn't expect him to go as far as preparing a gold-lame tuxedo just for today.

S: Well, I haven't had much screen time lately, so I used my free time to sew it myself.

Author: ...A gold-lame tuxedo hand-sewn by a Dark Lord...

L: ...That might actually be a rare item... Author, give him more screen time. I'm starting to feel sorry for him...

Author: ...Mmm... but maybe he finds this lifestyle fulfilling in its own way...

L: ...Well... setting aside S's lack of work... if he's showed up, that means it's finally time! The Popularity Poll!

Author: Indeed! Now, Subordinate S! Take the stage and MC to your heart's content!

S: I have no reason to be called "Subordinate" by the author!

(S delivers a "Gomes" punch)

L: Oh! There it is! Subordinate S's finishing move, the Ice-Block Smash! ...Wait, what are you doing knocking out the author? How are we supposed to finish the segment...?

S: Don't worry! I've already extracted the details from him!

L: Oh. Then it's okay. Alright, let's get this moving.

S: Understood! At your command! ...And so, everyone! Thank you for the long wait! I shall now announce the format for the "Shine Bright to the Heavens! The 3rd Slayers Character Popularity Poll"! *(Fanfare rings out)*

L: No way!? Where is that fanfare coming from!?

S: Heh. Nothing much. Just the Berlin Philharmonic, whom I summoned just for today.

L: Liar. Absolute liar.

S: Anyway, here are the voting methods! This time, characters from the TV series and movies are allowed to crash the party! So, even "I love King Moros" is totally okay!

L: ...Who... is that...? —Wait, if TV and movie characters are okay, what about the Radio and OVA characters?

S: There aren't really any original characters in those. Now, for the voting method: votes MUST be sent via official postcards. Writing "P.S. One vote for Lina" at the end of a fan letter or standing at the editor-in-charge's bedside saying "I humbly request one vote for Sir Gizan" is invalid. Also, don't forget your address, real name, and zip code. One character per postcard.

L: One person per card... does that mean we can vote multiple times?

S: Yes.

L: Yesssss! Everyone! Buy postcards until you're bankrupt and vote for ME every time!

S: Unfortunately, that won't work, Lady Lina.

L: ...Huh...?

S: There's more. The voting period is for exactly one year, from January 1, 1997, to the end of December. —And here is the crucial part... One reader can only cast ONE vote per month!

L: ...Excuse me...?

S: In other words, one vote a month for twelve months means each reader can cast a total of 12 points. For example, if you want to give 12 points to Lady Lina, you have to write "One vote for Lina" on a postcard every single month for a year.

L: ...That sounds incredibly tedious for the people sending them... Can't they just send 12 votes in one big batch?

S: ...Um... according to a comment from the now-deceased Author: "It is indeed tedious, and people might forget. But that is exactly why! True love and devotion for the characters will determine the winner!" ...Apparently. By the way, batch-sending or writing "This is a hassle so 12 points for Zel" on one card will be treated as 0 points.

L: ...I see... The Author's plan is to drag this out for a year so he can announce the progress in new *Slayers* volumes next year and use it for afterword material...

S: Most likely. The memo he gave me says "Announce progress in upcoming volumes!" —Also, "one vote per month" is judged strictly by the postmark. If you panic and mail it at the end of the month and the postmark is dated the 1st of the next month, it will count for that next month, so be careful.

L: ...So, if someone wants to give me two votes and sends one on January 30th and another in mid-February, but the first one gets a February 1st postmark... they'll both be counted as February votes. Since that's a duplicate, it'll be processed as 0 votes.

S: Exactly. It's pretty strict. And so, voting starts next January!

L: Please vote for me! Whether your heart is pure or not, give me your vote! I'm aiming for the Top Five this time!

S: And that concludes the guidelines for the 3rd Slayers Popularity Poll!

L: See you all in the next volume! *(L and S wave as the curtain falls. The Author is still lying*

outside the curtain, motionless.)

Afterword: End